

A Case Study on Individuals' Opinions about Social Media Usage

N. Gizem KOÇAK, Ph.D.

Anadolu University

Faculty of Open Education

26470 Eskişehir/Turkey

Abstract

Social media platforms which are one of today's most widely used communication platforms cause a transformation in users' role by enabling them to become active contributors of the contents instead of just being passive consumers of information. In this context, exploring the motivations behind social media usage gains importance. The uses and the gratifications approach which focuses on the motivations related to the media usage and the factors that affect these motivations is highly directive in terms of explaining individuals' social media usage motivations as well. In this study, the general views of individuals about social media usage were determined. Data were collected through an open-ended question which aimed to explore the general views of the participants about social media. In this context, 60 participants from the province of Eskişehir have answered the open-ended question. The encoding process has been performed via QSR-Nvivo 8 software program. The data has been classified as main themes based on the topics that highlighted by the participants. It is determined that the general views of the participants about social media have mainly focused on the advantages and disadvantages of social media and the participants' opinions correspond to the basic motivational categories of uses and gratifications approach.

Keywords: Web 2.0, Social Media, User Generated Content, Uses and Gratifications

1. Introduction

Web 2.0 brings individuals to the center of a creation process that enables them to produce their own content and share those contents with the communities they choose. User-generated content may appear in various ways such as sharing of thoughts and comments on various issues or sharing contents as photos, music, videos, etc. In this manner, user-generated content transforms the processes of production and distribution of cultural products (Koren, 2010: 2).

When we think about today's media or social media, it can be said that maybe for the first time the "active audience" concept become more meaningful. In the past, the media audience was just passively exposed to the contents provided by the media. The audience didn't have a chance to contribute to the contents or information; users were just the consumers of the contents. But Web 2.0 technologies and social media have changed the relationship between the media and the audience. Via Web 2.0 platforms, users found a chance to participate or even produce and share the contents besides consuming them. Web 2.0 provided user-generated content and also interactive, participatory and cooperative platform for users. In this context, the uses and gratifications approach, with its focus on the active audience, is providing highly meaningful and favorable perspective especially for the researches related to today's media and its users.

According to the uses and gratifications approach, individuals choose mass media tools based on their personal and social needs and they can use the media for different purposes to satisfy those needs. The approach focuses on the motivations related to the media usage and the factors that affect these motivations (Sheldon, 2008). People's needs, desires and motivations which have social and psychological origins can be handled as the underlying causes of media usage and peoples' needs behind their media usage can be handled as information, entertainment, relaxation, friendship and escape (McQuail, 2005: 424).

Within the framework of uses and gratifications approach, some classifications have been revealed related to the gratifications that people obtain as a result of their media usage.

In general, the motivations related to the media usage that the uses and gratifications researches focused on are 'entertainment', 'social integration/interaction', 'personal identity/self-actualization' and 'information'. 'Entertainment' refers to the motivations as relaxation, spend time and escape from the problems or limitations of daily life. 'Social integration/interaction' refers to the motivations as communicating with others, feeling less alone, belonging to a group, seeking or providing support and advice, social pressure. 'Personal identity/self-actualization' refers to the motivations as self-expression, self-presentation, recognition, self-confidence, reinforcement of the values and discovering the truth. 'Information' refers to the motivations as surveillance, seeking for recommendations and opinions to satisfy the interest and curiosity, the need for the information about the complex world, getting information about the things that may affect or help the person to achieve or learn something (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; McQuail, 2005; Muntinga et.al, 2011).

According to Kaye (2007: 129), uses and gratifications approach has been used to understand the motivations behind the use of traditional media like radio, television, newspaper, magazines etc. for many years, but over time this approach has been started to apply to the researches about new communication technologies and it is a very appropriate approach especially for the researches related to Internet. Similarly, McQuail (2005: 427) stated that, uses and gratifications approach is very appropriate for the new media researches especially in terms of comparing and defining.

Briefly, in the center of uses and gratifications approach there is the assumption that the audience is active in terms of media usage. According to this approach, the individuals choose the media and the contents based on their needs and desires for obtaining various gratifications rather than being passively exposed to the contents that are presented to them. The uses and gratifications approach, with its focus on the active audience, is providing highly meaningful and favorable perspective especially for the researches related to today's media and its users. Hereby, as a result of social media's becoming one of today's most widely used communication platforms, it can be said that it is gaining more importance to have a deeper understanding about social media, its users, their opinions, reasons and motivations for their use of social media platforms.

In this study, a part of the findings are given from our PhD dissertation (Koçak, 2012) that explores the general patterns of social media usage of the individuals and their basic motivations in the case of the city of Eskişehir.

2. Methodology

Eskişehir is taken as the application universe in terms of this study¹. A sample of 401 people was chosen by using the method of stratified sampling who represent the city of Eskişehir in terms of gender, age and education level. The data on demographic features, the frequency of social media usage and behaviors of social media usage of the sample group were collected by using a questionnaire. Besides the close-ended questions, at the end of the questionnaire, an open-ended question which aims at exploring the general views of the participants about social media was asked as well. After the data collection procedure has been completed, it is seen that 60 of 401 participants have answered this open-ended question. The frequencies and the percentages about the gender, marital status, age and education level of the participants are given in Table 1.

¹ Eskişehir is a slightly big city in north western Turkey (Population approx.: 700.000), situated in the middle of Istanbul and Ankara, about 330 km east of the former and 233 km west of the latter. Commonly known as a university town, the city has a considerable high level of education and income among other cities in Turkey.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

DEMOGRAPHICS		f	%
Gender	Female	35	58,3
	Male	25	41,7
Marital Status	Married	26	43,3
	Single	34	56,7
Age	15-24	12	20,0
	25-34	15	25,0
	35-44	11	18,3
	45-54	13	21,7
	55-69	9	15,0
Education	Primary school degree	10	16,7
	High school degree	16	26,7
	Higher education degree	23	38,3
	Post-graduate degree	11	18,3
Total		60	100,0

After the data has been collected, the encoding process has been performed via QSR-Nvivo 8 program and the data has been classified as main themes and sub-themes based on the topics that highlighted by the participants. According to the views of the participants, two main themes have been determined as (1) advantages and (2) disadvantages of social media.

2.1. The Advantages Theme and Its Sub-themes

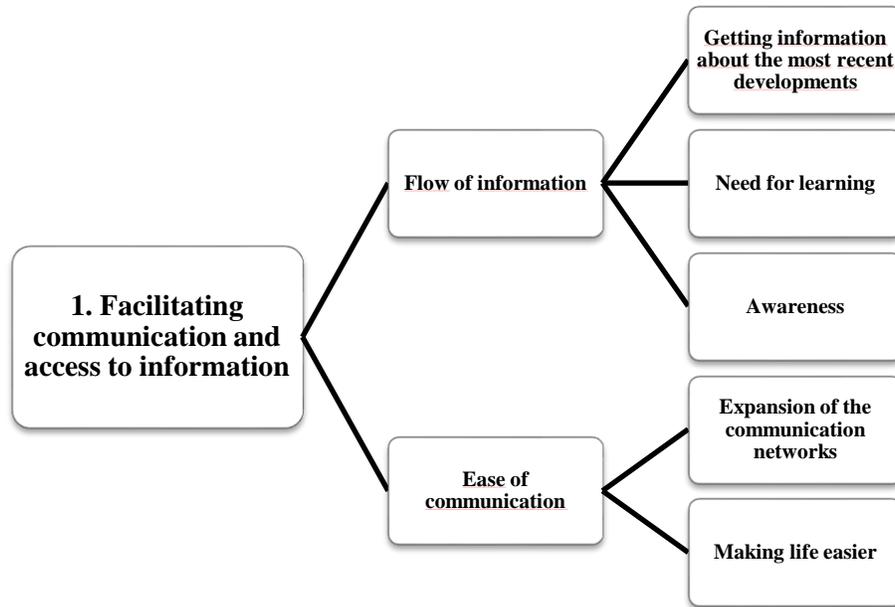
When the views that focused on the advantages of social media are generally evaluated, **7 sub-themes** have been determined under the “advantages” main theme and it is seen that the participants mainly focused on the issues as “*facilitating communication and access to information*”, “*freedom of expression*”, “*facilitation of organization*”, “*entertainment*”, “*socialization*”, “*monitoring the technological developments and adaptation*” and “*economic communication and commercial benefits*”. The frequencies and the percentages about the views of participants on the advantages of social media are given in Table 2.

Table 2: The Frequencies of the Views of the Participants about the Advantages of Social Media

Advantages	f	%
1.Facilitating communication and access to information	15	27
2.Freedom of expression	9	16
3.Facilitating organization	8	15
4.Entertainment	7	13
5.Socialization	7	13
6.Monitoring the technological developments and adaptation	5	9
7.Economic communication and commercial benefits	4	7
Total	55	100

It is determined that 55 of 60 participants mentioned about the advantages of social media and the most prominent focus point expressed by the participants within the “**advantages**” of social media is “**facilitating communication and access to information**”. It is seen that 27% of these participants focused on this sub-theme. When each sub-theme and the highlighted points under these sub-themes are examined in detail, it can be said that “facilitating communication and access to information” sub-theme is the most prominent one. The highlighted points by the participants under the “facilitating communication and access to information” sub-theme can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Facilitating Communication and Access to Information Sub-theme



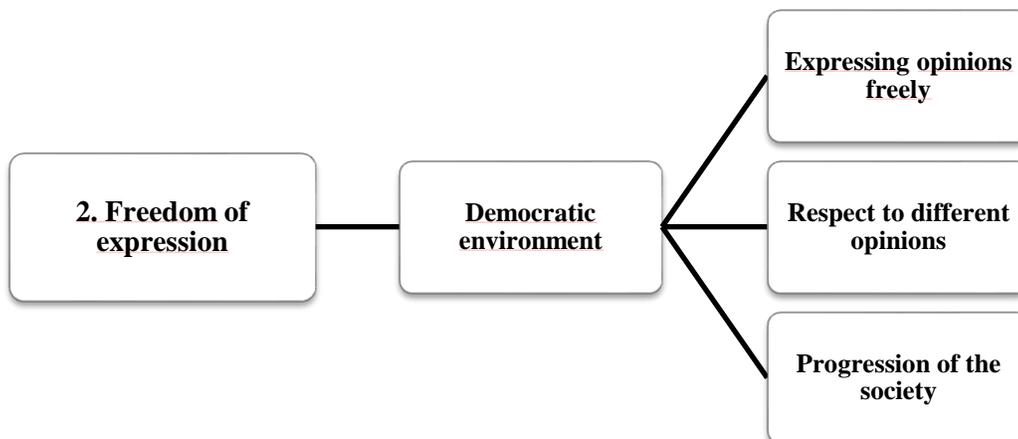
As seen in Table 3, the participants have especially focused on the “flow of information” and “ease of communication” advantages of social media in the scope of “facilitating communication and access to information” sub-theme. The participants’ focus points about the “flow of information” aspect of social media can be grouped under the headings as “getting information about the most recent developments”, “need for learning” and “awareness”. Also, according to the participants’ views, “expansion of the communication networks” and “making life easier” can be handled as the prominent headings about the “ease of communication” advantage of social media usage. Some of the selected expressions of participants related to the concerned sub-themes are given below:

P277: *“I think that social media can create awareness by facilitating communication. Also, it is a useful tool to be aware of the current developments in the world. One who uses social media doesn’t need to make extra effort to follow the agenda. All current news is on your profile immediately. In this manner social media makes our life easier.”*

P263: *“Progress and civilization depend on the power of the communication networks to reach every single individual. For this reason, the ease of communication provided by social media is important and the popularity of social media plays an important role in this manner.”*

The second sub-theme of the advantages main theme is “freedom of expression”. The highlighted points by the participants under the “freedom of expression” sub-theme can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Freedom of Expression Sub-theme



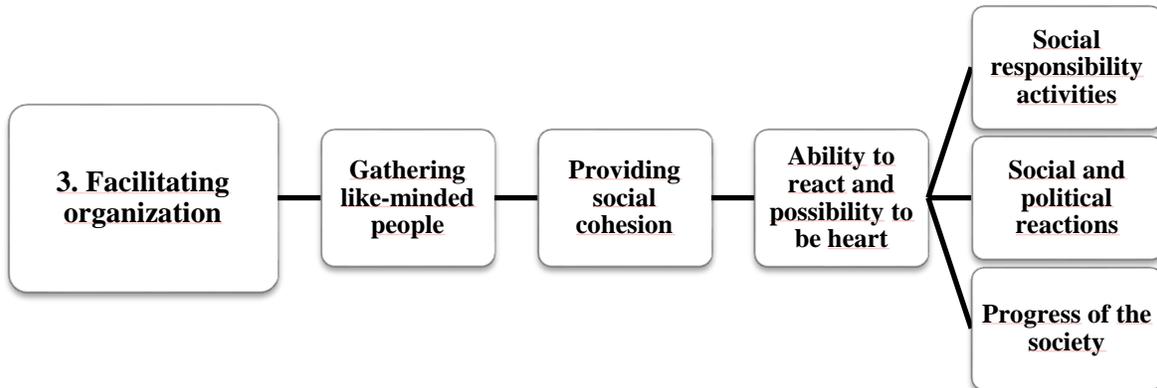
When the second sub-theme –freedom of expression- is examined, it is seen that the participants have focused on social media’s ability to provide a “democratic environment” and in this context, they mentioned the issues as “expressing opinions freely”, “respect to different opinions” and “progression of the society”. Some of the selected expressions of participants related to the concerned sub-themes are given below:

P128: “Social media is an important platform in terms of expressing opinions freely about political and social issues.”

P7: “Expressing opinions freely is crucial in terms of the progress of the society and social media provides an environment which new and creative ideas can emerge. In this manner, social media's democratic nature let people to respect each other's opinions more than before.”

The third sub-theme of the advantages main theme is “facilitating organization”. The highlighted points by the participants under the “facilitating organization” sub-theme can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Facilitating Organization Sub-theme

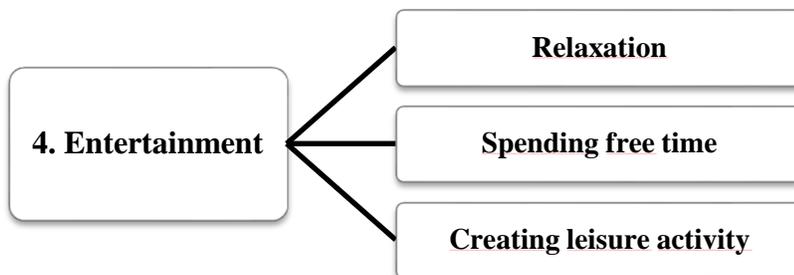


When the third sub-theme is examined, it is seen that the participants’ views are especially focused on the advantages of social media as “gathering like-minded people”, “providing social cohesion” and “ability to react and possibility to be heard”. Also, issues as “social responsibility activities”, “social and political reactions” and “progress of society” can be handled as the prominent headings about the “ability to react and possibility to be heard” advantage of social media usage. One of the participants’ opinions on these issues can be seen below:

P7: “I think that social media is important in terms of the progress of society and providing social cohesion. Social media facilitates like-minded people to come together, react and organize when it is needed. Social media encourages people to be heard. This should be considered. I believe that social media should use for these kinds of purposes.”

The fourth sub-theme of the advantages theme is “entertainment”. The highlighted points by the participants under the “entertainment” sub-theme can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Entertainment Sub-theme

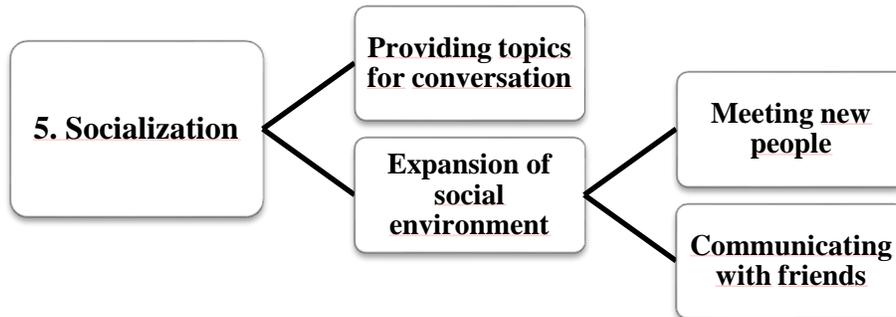


When the fourth sub-theme is examined, it is seen that the participants generally mentioned the issues as “relaxation”, “spending free time” and “creating leisure activity” within the “entertainment” advantage of social media. One of the participants’ thoughts on this issue can be seen below:

P205: *“Actually, you need time for using social media. As far as I observed, it’s not appropriate for the people who have busy work life. In fact, social media is an enjoyable platform which rehabilitates and comforts people. A great tool especially for retirees and those who don’t work!”*

The fifth sub-theme of the advantages theme is “socialization”. The highlighted points by the participants under the “socialization” sub-theme can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7: Socialization Sub-theme



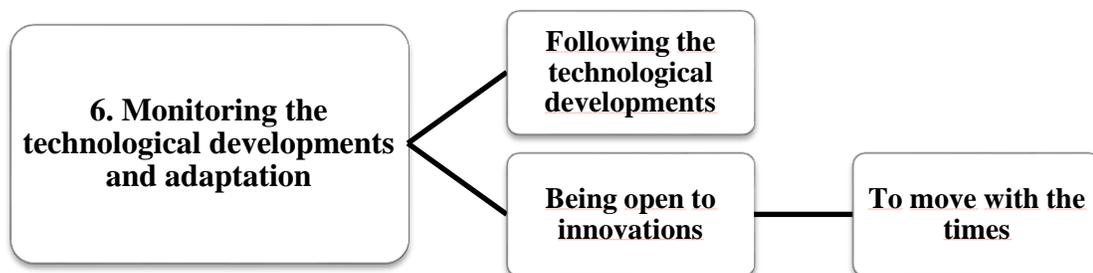
When the fifth sub-theme is examined, as seen in Table 7, it is revealed that the participants mainly focused on social media’s ability to “provide topics for conversation” and “expansion of social environment” within the “socialization” advantage of social media. Especially, “meeting new people” and “communicating with friends” are the prominent headings related to “expansion of social environment” aspect of social media. Some of the selected expressions of participants related to the concerned sub-themes are given below:

P186: *“Social media socialize people even though it doesn’t replace face-to-face communication. Thanks to social media, I can meet new people as well as I can contact with my old friends that I haven’t seen for many years. I don’t need to know where my old friends live, or what they do or their phone numbers or e-mail addresses to reach them. Social media brings them to me already.”*

P181: *“I feel more comfortable in social media and it helps me to socialize easier. It provides lots of topics for conversations.”*

The sixth sub-theme of the advantages theme is “monitoring the technological developments and adaptation”. The highlighted points by the participants under this sub-theme can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8: Monitoring the Technological Developments and Adaptation Sub-theme

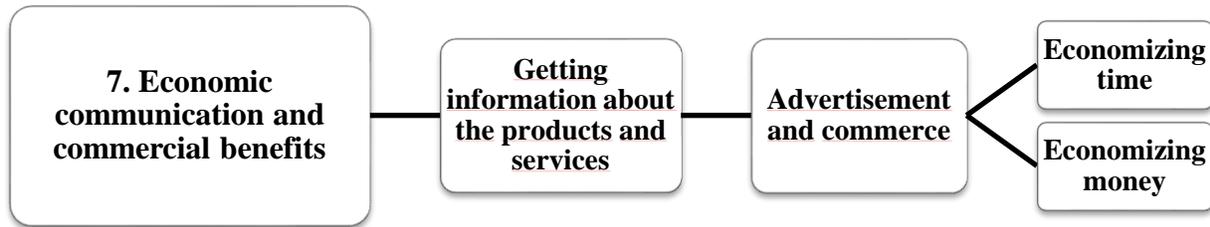


When the sixth sub-theme is examined, it is seen that the main focus points about the “monitoring the technological developments and adaptation” advantage of social media are “following the technological developments” and “being open to innovations”. Ability “to move with the times” by using social media has also been expressed by the participants as an advantage.

P171: *“I think it is important to follow social media in terms of keeping track of the technological developments. We should keep up with the times.”*

The seventh and the last sub-theme of the advantages theme is “economic communication and commercial benefits”. The highlighted points by the participants under this sub-theme can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9: Economic Communication and Commercial Benefits Sub-theme



As seen in Table 9, the participants emphasized the issues as “getting information about the products and services” and “advertisement and commerce” in the scope of social media’s “economic communication and commercial benefits” advantage. They also mentioned about “economizing time and money” within the context of “advertisement and commerce”. One of the participants’ opinions about these issues can be seen below:

P281: *“In my opinion, social media helps to economize money and time in terms of both individual and corporate communication. It is easier for companies to reach their customers and they can also make their products and services’ promotions with lower prices. Reaching to people is easier via social media, so reaching to customers is easier via social media as well. Likewise it’s getting easier for customers to reach the information about the products. People are making researches and reading the complaints or suggestions about the products from social media before they decided to buy something.”*

2.2. The Disadvantages Theme and Its Sub-themes

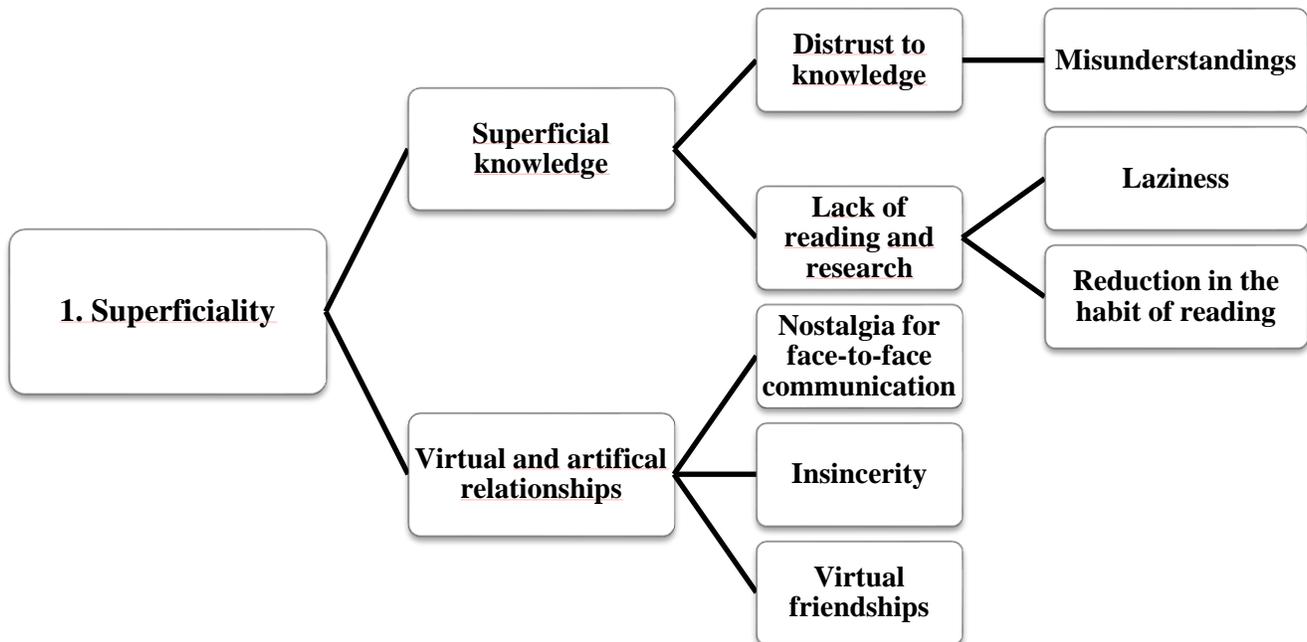
When the views that focused on the disadvantages of social media are generally evaluated, **6 sub-themes** have been determined under the “disadvantages” main theme and it is seen that the participants mainly focused on the issues as “superficiality”, “ethical concerns”, “waste of time”, “creating an addiction”, “pollution of information” and “feeling of loneliness”. The frequencies and the percentages about the views of participants on the disadvantages of social media are given in Table 10.

Table 10: The Frequencies of the Views of the Participants about the Disadvantages of Social Media

Disadvantages	f	%
Superficiality	19	32
Ethical concerns	12	20
Waste of time	10	17
Creating an addiction	8	13
Pollution of information	7	11
Feeling of loneliness	4	7
Total	60	100

It is seen that all of the 60 participants have mentioned the disadvantages of social media and the most prominent focus point within the “disadvantages” theme is determined as “superficiality” issue. 32% of the participants focused on this sub-theme as seen in Table 10.

When each sub-theme and the highlighted points under these sub-themes are examined in detail, it can be said that “superficiality” sub-theme is the most prominent one. The highlighted points by the participants under the “superficiality” sub-theme can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11: Superficiality Sub-theme

As seen in Table 11, the participants have especially focused on the disadvantages like “superficial knowledge” and “virtual and artificial relationships” of social media in the scope of “superficiality” sub-theme. The participants’ focus points about the “superficial knowledge” aspect of social media can be grouped under the headings as “distrust to knowledge” and “lack of reading and research”. Under these headings, it is seen that the participants mentioned about “misunderstandings”, “laziness” and “reduction in the habit of reading”. Also, according to the participants’ views, “nostalgia for face-to-face communication”, “insincerity” and “virtual friendships” can be handled as the prominent headings about the “virtual and artificial relationships” disadvantage of social media usage. Some of the selected expressions of participants related to the concerned sub-themes are given below:

P1: *“Indeed in social media, most of the people exhibit an identity that they desire instead of their exact identity. They create a kind of dream world, a kind of desired self... they’re getting away from the reality and this is killing the sincerity.”*

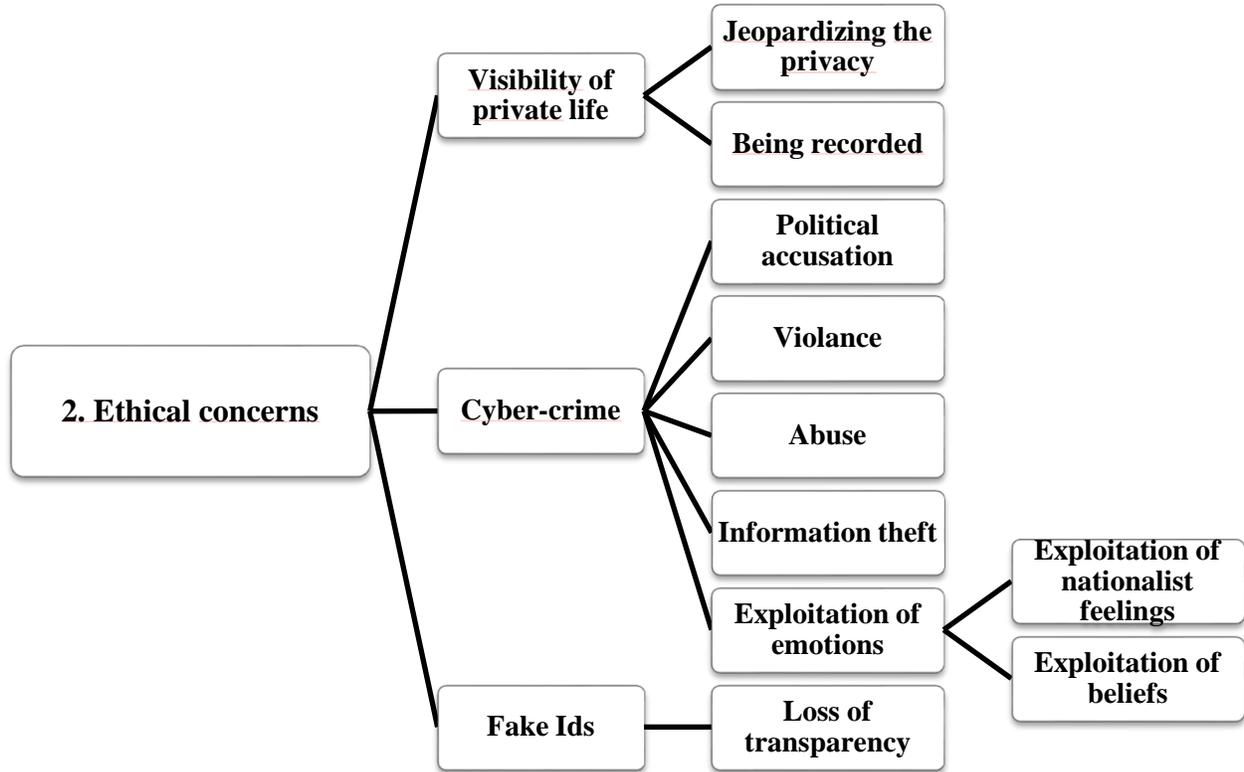
P109: *“Even though we’re using our real names and identities, it is virtual! Social media has pros and cons. That’s why, it should be used carefully. Still we need real faces and real conversations. The reality has another taste. Virtual social media, virtual friendships... Everything can become a lie in a minute.”*

P247: *“I believe that social media cannot replace the face-to-face relationships and it’s not possible to maintain real friendships via social media.”*

P237: *“People don’t spare their times to read books because of spending most of their times in social media. They content themselves with the information obtained from just social media, they’re getting lazy.”*

The second sub-theme of disadvantages theme is determined as “ethical concerns”. The highlighted points by the participants under the “ethical concerns” sub-theme can be seen in Table 12.

Table 12: Ethical Concerns Sub-theme



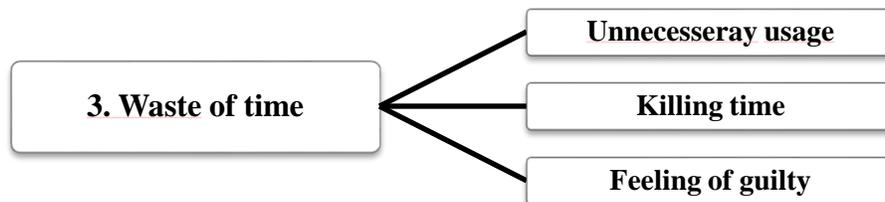
When “ethical concerns” sub-theme is examined, it can be said that the main focus points of the participants are the issues as “visibility of private life”, “cyber-crime” and “fake identities”. “Jeopardizing the privacy” and “being recorded” are the prominent headings about the “visibility of private life” issue. On the other hand, it is seen that the participants focused on “political accusation”, “violence”, “abuse”, “information theft” and “exploitations of emotions” within “cyber-crime” issue. Also, “loss of transparency” is determined as an emphasized issue in the scope of “fake identities” heading. Some of the opinions related to the “ethical concerns” sub-theme can be seen below:

P100: *“We can easily get information about what’s going on in others’ lives, but this may be a bit inconvenient like being able to download the others’ photos easily... I think people like to watch each other and this is really an effective dimension in social media’s such popularity.”*

P141: *“I think the main purpose of the social media usage is changing as information theft, harassment, political accusation e.t.c.”*

The third sub-theme of the disadvantages main theme is “waste of time”. The highlighted points by the participants under this sub-theme can be seen in Table 13.

Table 13: Waste of Time Sub-theme



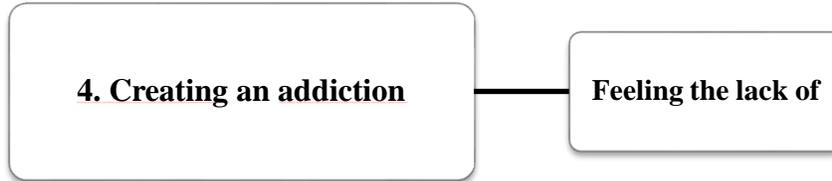
As seen in Table 13, the participants’ main focus points about “waste of time” disadvantage of social media usage can be summarized as “unnecessary usage”, “killing time” and “feeling of guilty”. Some of the selected views of participants about these issues can be seen below:

P247: *“I believe that people spend too much time with social media. It’s something like watching paparazzi all day.”*

P237: *“People spend most of their time in social media instead of reading books or dealing with hobbies. I think it’s time consuming. There are more useful and better things in life.”*

The fourth sub-theme under the disadvantages main theme is determined as “creating an addiction”. The highlighted points by the participants under the “creating addiction” sub-theme can be seen in Table 14.

Table 14: Creating an Addiction Sub-theme

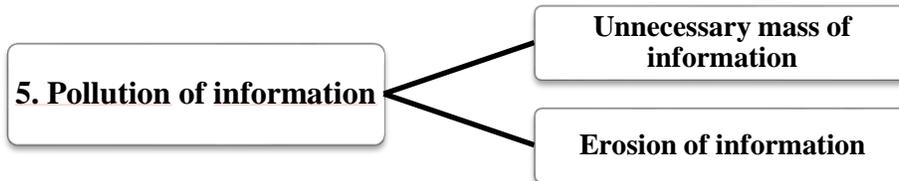


It is revealed that the participants mainly focused on “feeling the lack of” social media platforms within “creating an addiction” sub-theme. One of the participants’ statement on this issue can be seen below:

P235: *“I believe that social media is making people addicted to the Internet. After a while it’s becoming a habit. Maybe it has appeared as a communication tool, but now it became most of people’s main purpose. For example, sometimes people take photos just for their Facebook pages instead of taking photos for having lovely memories.”*

The fifth sub-theme of the disadvantages main theme is determined as “pollution of information”. The highlighted points by the participants under this sub-theme can be seen in Table 15.

Table 15: Pollution of Information Sub-theme

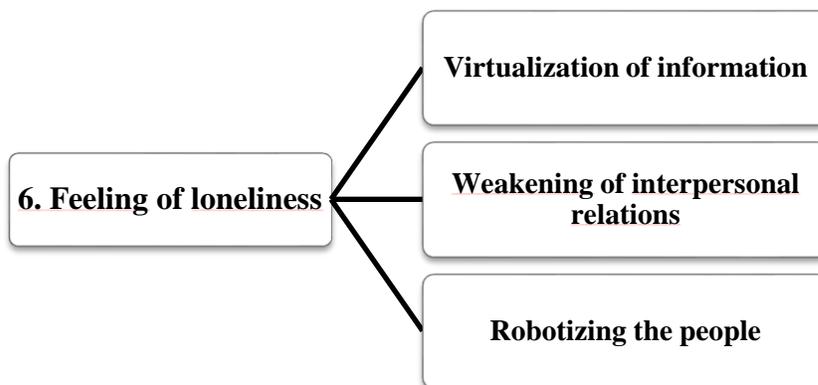


When “pollution of information” sub-theme is examined, it can be said that the participants’ focus points are the issues as “unnecessary mass of information” and “erosion of information” disadvantages of social media. One of the participants’ opinions about this issue can be seen below:

P149: *“There is too much pollution of information in social media. When everybody shares everything, at the end I have lots of unnecessary stuff in my Facebook page!”*

The sixth and the last sub-theme of the disadvantages main theme is “feeling of loneliness”. The highlighted points by the participants under this sub-theme can be seen in Table 16.

Table 16: Feeling of Loneliness Sub-theme



As seen in Table 16, the prominent points which were emphasized by the participants within the “feeling of loneliness” aspect of social media are “virtualization of information”, “weakening of interpersonal relations” and “robotizing the people”. One of the participants’ statements about these issues can be seen below:

P237: “*Social media is destroying relationships between people. People are getting lonely and they spend many hours in front of their computers and they claim that they are socializing on their own. I don’t believe that!*.”

3. Conclusion

According to the results of this study, it is revealed that the views that focused on the advantages of social media usage overlap the basic motivational categories of the uses and gratifications approach. It can be said that the participants’ opinions correspond to the basic motivational categories of the uses and gratifications approach as “entertainment”, “information”, “social interaction” and “self-expression/actualization”.

It is also revealed that the participants refer to the disadvantages of social media more than its advantages. It can be said that the issues that participants focused about disadvantages of social media are highly directive in terms of highlighting the points of concerns about social media. Especially, the issues under the disadvantages theme such as ethical concerns, pollution of information and creating addiction can be seen as important points and clues for the social media practitioners.

Even though all the participants are social media users, they acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of social media and they also have a critical approach to social media. The opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of the social media show that the participants have some concerns about social media but on the other hand they follow the developments in social media with curiosity and interest.

For future researches, it will be helpful to make comparisons between the social media users and the ones who don’t use the social media. To explore the reasons for not using the social media can also provide insights about how the social media is positioning in people’s minds.

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