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Questioning The Assumed Benefits Of Social Media Use For Individuals – A Critical Literature Review

Nikolaus Stauffenberg

MSc Management of Information Systems and Digital Innovation
Department of Management
London School of Economics and Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a key part of modern life. However, there is no clear consensus in research as to whether its use is beneficial or harmful to users. The aim of this paper is to critically examine theories that frame social media as beneficial by questioning their assumptions. This paper uses a non-systematic, critical literature review to examine the central assumptions of relevant IS studies and adjacent fields, and how far those assumptions hold. To cover the various forms of interaction on social media, a framework from uses and gratification theory that distinguishes between the benefits and harms of consumption, participation and production of content is applied. The core findings are that in the reviewed literature, positive representations of social media tend to explain perceived benefits and user motivation, while critical perspectives highlight structural harms such as disinformation, big data collection and loss of control. Overall, the findings suggest that the claimed benefits are often conditional and limited, while the disadvantages appear to be better documented.

1. Introduction

Since its invention, the influence of social media (SM) on modern lives has grown steadily. It is estimated that around half of the world's population is active on SM (Wanniarachchi et al., 2023; Zachlod et al., 2022). The use of SM has revolutionized modern communication and accounts for a large part of most people's online time (Mutanga et al., 2023; Song et al., 2014). Constituting a large part of modern life, SM has been extensively researched in literature. Still, there is no consensus on how to evaluate benefits of SM for end users (Song et al., 2014).

The aim of this critical literature review is to shed light on this issue, by interrogating the assumptions behind contributions that claim beneficial consequences of SM use. To achieve this, mainly papers from relevant Information Systems journals are considered, while also other disciplines are included. The articles considered were identified through an exploratory search of relevant scientific databases. The selection of sources was based on reviewing abstracts. The resulting selection therefore captures prominent positions and illustrative findings rather than the full body of relevant studies. To gain analytical depth, the use of SM is divided into three areas: Consumption, Participation and Production. This framework was originally designed by Shao (2009). Key terms are defined in the following.

Due to the various forms it can take, it is not entirely clear what falls under the umbrella of the

Corresponding Author
Email Address: n.h.schenk-graf-von-stauffenberg@lse.ac.uk

term SM. Often, their use cases, purposes, and users differ (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For this reason, a broad definition is applied for this review: social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), whereas "Web 2.0" describes the shift from a "read-only" internet, where users passively consumed content published by a small number of producers, to a "read-write" internet in which users continuously and collaboratively contribute content. This shift rests on a theoretical reconceptualization of the internet as a participatory platform, and technological developments, like open APIs, and increased bandwidth (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Other terms that need to be defined are "benefit" and "harm". While much of the literature uses the terms "beneficial" and "harmful" in terms of whether individual well-being is increased or decreased (Allcott et al., 2020), some critical IS research highlights additional dimensions in terms of privacy (Bonina et al., 2021; Ngwenyama et al., 2024), autonomy and control (Ngwenyama et al., 2024; Schou & Pors, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Accordingly, the term "beneficial" is used to describe consequences that are claimed or theorized to be positive in these dimensions, while "harmful" or "challenging" refer to aspects identified by critical views that question such claims. It is also important to note that this literature review exclusively considers the positions that argue for benefits at the individual level. Accordingly, only positions that discuss harm at an individual level are used to question their assumptions.

2. Benefits and Challenges of Social Media Interaction

In this part, a conceptual framework is introduced to add structure and analytical depth to the review. Then, positions are presented and their assumptions are critically examined and questioned by further contributions to the literature.

2.1 Three Categories of Social Media Interaction – Conceptual Framework

Shao (2009) developed the framework applied here, which draws on Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain why users engage with social media. It identifies three main categories of SM interactions: Consumption of content, Participation with other users or content and Production of content. Applying this framework is useful for three main reasons. First, the interaction types cover the key interactions of SM and have also served as framework for many studies that researched its use (Falgoust et al., 2022). By covering the primary modes of interaction, they help to critically examine theoretical assertions about benefits of key interactions of SM. Second, they are analytically distinct (Shao, 2009) and thus help to minimize overlaps in the analysis. In practice, however, the three types overlap to some extent: for example, commenting on another user's post simultaneously constitutes participation with existing content and production of new content. This review therefore does not assume clear boundaries between the categories. Finally, the framework allows claimed benefits and critical challenges to coexist and accepts that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This is important because questioning assumed SM benefits gives rise to critical arguments that problematize the presented claims.

2.2 Consumption

The consumption of SM content is described as reading texts and blogs, listening to music, and watching videos and images (Shao, 2009).

The consumption of content from SM is considered beneficial by some contributions in the literature. One such benefit is that users can expand their knowledge through content. One

position is Faraj et al. (2011) who use a lens from organizational science and stress that the lack of formal structure on many platforms encourages users to contribute their knowledge. On the receiving end, others can personally benefit from that and often find solutions for their personal problems. There is indeed evidence that suggests, that SM are often used as first port of call for information and news for many people (Ren et al., 2024). Another position that supports this comes from Bonina et al. (2021). From a socio-economic perspective, they look specifically at how removing frictions leads to information being disseminated on SM, such as Facebook. This allows people to absorb helpful information over long distances through content consumption. An example is that people in developing countries benefit because they can acquire knowledge about job opportunities.

This argument rests on one assumption: that users can actually process the additional information reduced friction makes available. There are some articles that suggest that this very removal of friction can also have harmful consequences for users because they are confronted with too much information (Allcott et al., 2020; Cordella, 2006). Through the perspective of transaction cost economics (TCE), for example, some argued that users incur more costs than benefits if increased access to information is not accompanied by an increase in information management capacity. Although Cordella (2006) originally refers to markets, it is applied here to SM consumption, assuming that information overload on SM has a similar effect on users. This view calls the first assumption into question. It can also be supported by empirical evidence, that suggests that users indeed feel an overload by the amount of information they are confronted with through SM content consumption (Fu et al., 2020). Further, SM users increasingly report negative physical and psychological effects due to increased stress levels and anxiety. They feel overwhelmed by the amount of news and information they consume (Holton & Chyi, 2012; Tarafdar et al., 2020). These examples suggest that removed frictions actually might lead to harmful consequences of SM content consumption. It seems plausible though, that it depends on the context of usage and both can hold true at the same time: For example, users may feel overwhelmed by too much news on Platform X, while others really benefit from learning about job opportunities through content on LinkedIn.

A second assumption that must be true in order to argue that users obtain information through content consumption and thereby benefit is that information on SM is true and not fake. This assumption is questioned by contributions to IS literature, but also by papers of psychology and medical research. So called fake news have become a substantial part of SM (Horner et al., 2021; Olan et al., 2024). There is quantitative evidence that many users of SM are aware that they already consumed and spread content that contains fake news (Barthel et al., 2016). Since this only concerns users who are aware of the issue, it can be assumed that the actual number of affected users is significantly higher (Moravec et al., 2020). What adds to the seriousness of the issue is that false news and misinformation spread much faster than true news and real information (Gimpel et al., 2021). Several scientific articles argue that this misinformation via SM content is indeed harmful. So called fake news harm consuming users because they are not only misleading but also create an environment in which people are manipulated, do not know what to believe and mistrust scientific sources. This is why they have become a major concern across the globe (Hopf et al., 2019; J. Li & Chang, 2023; Moravec et al., 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020; Tasnim et al., 2020).

2.3 Participation

Participation on SM is conceptualized as action,

in which users interact either with each other via instant messages or emails, or, in which they interact with content by liking, rating, or sharing existing content (Shao, 2009).

One theory that can be used to argue that participation in SM is beneficial for the end user is the social exchange theory (SET). According to SET, people actively consider the benefits they gained from social situations and weigh them against the costs they must sacrifice to get those benefits. Hu et al. (2015) apply this idea to SM participation, acknowledging that there appear to be benefits for the user in it such as maintaining social relationships, while challenges might occur such as a higher effort in managing them. Continuously weighing costs against benefits, users perform this trade-off calculation with the result of an individual online social value. If this value is positive, users will continue to participate in SM, for they benefit from it more than they sacrifice (Hu et al., 2015). If this concept holds true, one can argue that SM participation is "net-beneficial" for all users that have not stopped participating (Hu et al., 2015). There are different estimates on the number of active SM users, but the number continuously grew over the past years to at least 3.5 billion (Wanniarachchi et al., 2023; Zachlod et al., 2022). In the light of SET, a continuous growth of this number to almost half of the world's population can be taken as evidence that participating in SM is beneficial for a major part of humankind.

Although the SET model provides a useful framework for understanding why users continue to participate in SM, its explanatory power depends heavily on assumptions about the idealised rationality of users and their access to information, which need to be examined more closely in the context of SM. First, it is assumed that users are aware of all the costs and benefits of participating so that they can correctly calculate the value of it. A position that challenges this first assumption is formulated by Ngwenyama et al. (2024). In this research commentary, Critical Social Theory is used to explicate how the owners of big platforms actively manipulate users into a continuous participation. The concept of a "Faustian Bargain" is used to explain users' relationships to platform owners like Meta. It is argued that users "set aside potential risks and accept digital service contracts" (Ngwenyama et al., 2024, p. 2035). Translated into SET language, it is argued that users do not fully understand the costs and risks involved. The risk for the individual that is mainly mentioned by Ngwenyama et al. (2024) is the collection of personal data that is created through participation and its use for strategic manipulation. With this first assumption of SET being questioned, it is possible that users participate in SM because the costs they are aware of only represent a part of the actual costs.

A second assumption of SET is, that users continuously and actively calculate their online social value of participating in SM. Again, Ngwenyama et al. (2024) question this idea. It is stated that individuals are accepting technology as "the fate of our age" (Ngwenyama et al., 2024, p. 2034). The position that technology is the decisive influence on the present day is no exception in IS literature (Baskerville et al., 2020; Schou & Pors, 2019; Yoo et al., 2012). Ngwenyama et al. (2024) argue that this view results in a self-resignation or "false consciousness" and leads users into routine, uncritical thinking that creates a digital habitus (Ngwenyama et al., 2024, p. 2034). In relation to SET, this means that technology is seen as so decisive for reality that users do not critically calculate its costs and benefits but instead participate in SM – which are part of this inevitable appearing reality. If so, a growing number of SM participants is not in itself evidence that participation benefits them.

Ngwenyama et al. (2024) do not only challenge

the mentioned SET assumptions. Their position that users are unaware of the risks of technology – and therefore also the risks of participating in SM – leads to an argument that participation is harmful to the end user. The reason is that traces of participation, such as liking content or texting with other users, are being captured and gathered as big data (Ngwenyama et al., 2024). Although liking content could arguably also be read as a form of consumption, since it accompanies the viewing of existing content, it is treated here as participation in line with Shao's (2009) classification, as it constitutes an active and recorded interaction rather than passive engagement. This distinction matters because it is precisely this active, traceable nature of participation – rather than the more passive act of consumption – that generates the data trails Ngwenyama et al. (2024) identify as harmful. The harmful consequences of big data collection and its monetization by SM owners are well studied. Examples of them are risking privacy rights of users (Bonina et al., 2021; Ngwenyama et al., 2024), the restriction of individual autonomy (Zuboff, 2019), and the manipulation and control of users (Ngwenyama et al., 2024; Zuboff, 2015). Those examples serve as evidence that SM participation has direct harmful consequences for users.

2.4 Production

The third type of interaction of users with SM is the production and publishing of content. Examples of this are videos, texts and pictures (Shao, 2009).

One theory that views SM content production as beneficial for users is Bourdieu's Practice Theory, as applied by Levina & Arriaga (2014) to SM content production. The thesis is that users benefit by building different types of capital through the production and sharing of content. The idea that capital creation is a key driver for content creation in SM can be found in many contributions to IS literature, with the focus often placed on social capital theory (Chiu et al., 2006; Faraj et al., 2011; G. Li & Yang, 2014; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). It can be argued that those who create content, such as good photos or high-quality texts, generate cultural skills – or cultural capital. Good content then generates recognition and status for the creator – or symbolic capital. Additionally, the content generates more contacts – or social capital. There is quantitative research that supports the idea that broadcasting information via SM – in other words producing content for many – reduces the users' loneliness (Matook et al., 2015). In words of practice theory, this could suggest that users indeed benefit from sharing content because they gain social capital. Accordingly, users then benefit from greater cultural skills, social contacts and prestige in the community (Levina & Arriaga, 2014).

An important assumption that must be true to argue with Social Practice Theory that users benefit from SM content production is that posts reliably lead to positive social interaction, such as positive new contacts, comments, and likes – social capital. However, this assumption is debatable: contributions to IS research suggest that content broadcasting or sharing on SM is not associated with social capital. Contradicting the interpretation of the findings of Matook et al. (2015), there is empirical evidence to suggest that users do not benefit from social capital when they produce content (Burke et al., 2011). One possible explanation for this tension is that while producing content for a large audience may reduce loneliness through self-expression, it does not necessarily lead to the mutual engagement required to generate social capital. It can therefore be argued that this assumption does not necessarily hold true. With it being wrong, one could argue that content production can also be harmful to users, because by producing content, one reveals information about oneself and thus becomes vulnerable. This can provoke negative interactions and not only prevent social capital but destroy it. One example that underscores this

thesis is hate speech, which is a major problem on SM (Mutanga et al., 2023). Posts often trigger hateful feedback targeting the creator based on their sexual orientation, ethnic origin, religion, gender, or appearance (McComb & Mills, 2022; Veldhuis et al., 2014; Wanniarachchi et al., 2023). This has harmful consequences for users, such as a disturbed relationship with their own body, anxiety, eating disorders, or depression (Wanniarachchi et al., 2023). Here again, it seems possible that the two positions are not mutually exclusive: it is, of course, plausible that a talented photographer can generate reach and contacts through posts on Facebook, for example, and thus benefit, while other users suffer bullying because of their posts. **Table 1** summarizes the outlined debate.

3. Conclusion

This critical literature review examined the benefits of SM use for users along three dimensions of interaction (content consumption, participation with users and content, and content production and sharing), while critically questioning the theoretical assumptions underlying these claimed benefits. Before considering the findings, it must be clearly noted once again that, due to the non-systematic approach of this review, conclusions can only be drawn about the papers discussed, not about the entire field of IS research. Overall, papers that claimed benefits of SM usage through theories were not easily found, while the challenges were well researched and widely represented among the papers evaluated. Disinformation and fake news, as well as the collection and monetization of big data, are comprehensively documented and discussed in the reviewed literature. An important finding of this work is that a large part of the literature highlighting the beneficial effects of SM focuses primarily on the advantages perceived by users and less on an objective assessment of individual well-being. Theories such as SET or social capital-based contributions therefore tend to explain why users are motivated to use SM and why they personally find this use beneficial. Critical perspectives, on the other hand, tend to take a more comprehensive view of the issue and often explicitly consider the possibility that users do not fully recognize the risks and disadvantages. This asymmetry is part of why the arguments pointing to harm come across as more convincing.

At the same time, it is striking that several lines of argument can exist complementarily and are not contradictory, even though criticism of the claimed benefits does not appear any less valid as a result. For example, it seems plausible that users benefit from access to information through the consumption of content, for example to find jobs, while others simultaneously experience information overload, stress or anxiety.

This literature review has some limitations that need to be addressed. The framework used provided a helpful analytical structure, but the boundaries between the types of interaction are not always clear, and some perspectives, such as SET or concerns about big data, could additionally be assigned to more categories of SM usage, than done in the review. Furthermore, there are considerable differences between types of SM, which is why more specific research that requires clearer distinctions in SM types would be beneficial. Also, due to the exploratory approach to literature search, this review is far from covering the entire spectrum of relevant research and lacks depth. For example, there is a breadth of psychological research that suggests that SM usage leads to addiction and is therefore harmful (Mujica et al., 2022; Vaghefi & Turel, 2024). This work has deliberately questioned only the claimed benefits of SM use. This opens space for future research that reverses this critical perspective by similarly questioning harm-oriented positions.

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Appendix:

Table 1. Conceptual Framework: Benefits vs. Harms of Social Media

Interaction Type	Benefits	Assumptions	Harms
Consumption	Access to information (Organisational Science; Socioeconomics)	(1) Capacity to process information (2) Information is accurate	(1) Information overload leading to stress (TCE / Empirical Evidence) (2) Fake news causing manipulation, mistrust and confusion (Empirical Evidence)
Participation	Positive online social value (SET)	(1) Users know all costs and risks (2) Users actively calculate costs vs. benefits	(1) Big data collection and monetisation, privacy violations and manipulation (Critical Theory / Surveillance Studies)
Production	Cultural, symbolic, and social capital (Bourdieu Practice Theory, Social Capital Theory, Empirical Evidence)	(1) Content production leads to positive social interactions	(1) Hate speech targeting creators, negative psychological effects (Empirical Evidence)