

The Influence of Social Curiosity on the Observing Behavior of Users on Social Network Sites

Full Paper

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Abstract

Social Network Site (SNS) service providers have a strong interest in knowing which factors drive different kinds of behavior in SNSs, in order to be able to foster behavior that is beneficial to their business models. Current studies neglect the factors driving Observing behavior: behavior that provides members with information within SNSs. Drawing from the Uses and Gratifications Theory, we postulate that Curiosity as well as its people-oriented facet, Social Curiosity, positively influence SNS members' Observing behavior. After surveying Facebook users and applying a structural equation modeling approach, we confirmed that two facets of Social Curiosity, General Social Curiosity and Covert Social Curiosity, positively influence Observing behavior. However, we were not able to confirm a corresponding influence of general Curiosity. Overall, our findings suggest that just being curious is not enough in order to be attracted to SNSs' Observing functions. Rather, people need to have a curiosity for people.

Keywords

Social Network Site, Sharing, Observing.

Introduction

Most Social Network Site (SNS) service providers' business models rely on selling personalized advertisements (e.g., Krasnova et al. 2010; Thambusamy et al. 2010). As a result, their revenue is not only determined by the total number of registered members but also by members' specific usage behavior (Gangadharbatla 2008; Katz and Shapiro 1985). More specifically, members can use SNSs in two distinct ways, i.e., by *sharing* information with other members or by *observing* information from others (cf. Backstrom et al. 2011; Benevenuto et al. 2009; Jiang et al. 2010): On the one hand, *Sharing* behavior (such as *writing comments* or *posting photos*) is crucial for both the amount of ads displayed (through increased site traffic) and for the revenue generated per ad (since more personal information enables a better targeting of users through personalization) (Cavusoglu et al. 2013). On the other hand, *Observing* behavior (such as *looking at other's profiles* and *reading other's posts*) is important to give *Sharing* a purpose. More specifically, in order to be able to effectively *share* something, a SNS member needs to have *observers* that he/she can potentially reach with his/her actions. Consequently, SNS service providers have a strong interest in knowing the factors that drive *Sharing* and *Observing* behavior in SNSs.

Current studies that investigate the influence factors of SNS usage limit themselves to the factors driving SNS members' *Sharing* behavior (e.g., Lo 2010) or to the factors driving *Actual System Use*, i.e., how often SNSs are generally used (e.g., Chen 2013). Hence, factors driving members' *Observing* behavior are currently not considered. Some studies suggested that *Curiosity* might be an important motivator of SNS members' *general* SNS usage (e.g., Choi et al. 2013). We take the next step and get more specific: By

drawing from the *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, we argue that *Curiosity* as well as its people-oriented facet, i.e. *Social Curiosity*, exert a positive influence on the *Observing* behavior of SNS members.

After surveying 188 *Facebook* users via an online questionnaire and applying a structural equation modeling approach, we were able to confirm that two facets of Social Curiosity, *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity*, are positive influence factors of *Observing* behavior. In contrast, we were not able to confirm a corresponding influence of general *Curiosity* and present possible explanations for the insignificance of this relationship.

In the next section, we define *Sharing* and *Observing* behavior, present *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, and introduce *Curiosity*, *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity*. Following this, we present our research model and research design. We then reveal and discuss our results before summarizing our findings, presenting their theoretical as well as practical implications, and providing an outlook on further research.

Theoretical Background

Sharing and Observing Behavior

Multiple studies provide similar classifications of SNS behavior (Backstrom et al. 2011; Benevenuto et al. 2009; Jiang et al. 2010). Although the used labels and provided definitions differ, the basic idea behind all these classifications is the same, i.e., that SNSs' functions enable members to *observe* or to *share* something. Drawing from the previous works, *Observing* behavior can be defined as any SNS usage that enables a member to gain information without anyone in the SNS's network being aware of this process, with the exception of the SNS service provider (cf. Backstrom et al. 2011; Benevenuto et al. 2009; Jiang et al. 2010; Krasnova et al. 2010). For example, when a user looks at information on other members' SNS profiles, he/she is able to 'observe' personal information about them (such as their actions, behaviors, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and core data). Commonly, nobody but the SNS service provider is aware of his/her visit. This is considered to be *Observing* behavior.

In contrast, *Sharing* behavior can be defined as any SNS usage where the information created can be noticed by other members within the SNS network (cf. Backstrom et al. 2011; Benevenuto et al. 2009; Jiang et al. 2010; Krasnova et al. 2010). For example, when a member updates the core data of his/her SNS profile, that member makes this information available to others. This is considered to be *Sharing* behavior.

Current studies that investigate the influence factors of SNS usage research the factors driving SNS members' *Sharing* behavior (e.g., Lo 2010) or to the factors driving *Actual System Use* (e.g., Chen 2013). In contrast, factors driving members' *Observing* behavior are currently not considered.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The *Uses and Gratifications Theory* (U&G; Figure 1) has been used in numerous research articles and thus acquired a prominent status in media research (Ruggiero 2000). It postulates that individuals' media usage is determined by their needs and wants with the ultimate goal of gratification (Rubin 2002).

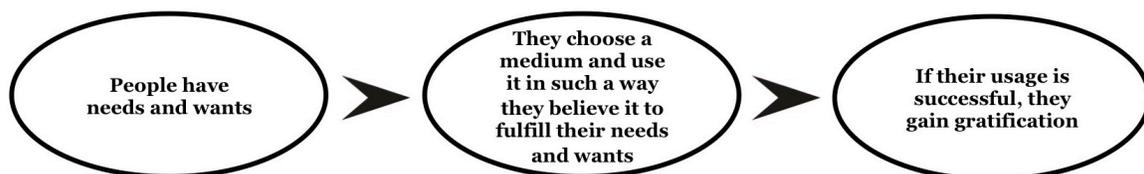


Figure 1. Uses and Gratifications Theory

More specifically, U&G assumes that people have specific needs and wants. Consequently, they are motivated to fulfill them and, hence, perform such behaviors that they believe are able to do so. For example, imagine an extraverted person: U&G postulates that he/she will choose a medium and use it in such a way that it satisfies his/her extraversion.

Various needs and wants that can drive media usage have been discussed in the U&G literature with *information seeking* being among the most popular ones (cf. Luo 2002). In the following section, we introduce *Curiosity* as well as *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity*. Drawing from the U&G, these three constructs will be postulated to be drivers of people's *Observing* behavior in SNSs later on.

(Social) Curiosity

Curiosity is a human being's intrinsic "desire for [acquiring] new information and knowledge" (Renner 2006, p. 305). Some studies suggested that it might be an important motivation for members' general SNS usage (e.g., Brandtzæg and Heim 2009; Choi et al. 2013; Pai and Arnott 2013). However, although *Curiosity* is all about *receiving information*, no study actually evaluated its role in *Observing* behavior in SNSs.

In addition to its generic conceptualization, studies regularly distinguish between various facets of *Curiosity* (Renner 2006). One such facet of *Curiosity* that has recently piqued researcher's interest is *Social Curiosity*: "an interest in how other people behave, think, and feel" (Renner 2006, p. 305). It is essential for human beings to extract information from their social environment in order to better integrate it (Baumeister et al. 2004; Foster 2004) and to build interpersonal relationships (Renner 2006), thus ultimately satisfying their *Need to Belong*¹ (cf. Baumeister and Leary 1995; Hartung and Renner 2013). Hence, *Social Curiosity* is an essential personality trait that facilitates a person's sense of belonging to a community.

Like *Curiosity*, *Social Curiosity* has been conceptualized as a multifaceted construct with two distinct facets: *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity* (Renner 2006). The first facet "describes a broad interest in the acquisition of new information about how other people behave, act and feel" (Renner 2006, p. 314); the second one describes an interest to obtain interpersonal information by unobtrusive or covert exploratory behaviors (Renner 2006). However, research on *Social Curiosity* has so far been limited to just a few studies and none were related to the SNS context.

First, Renner (2006) introduced the concept of *Social Curiosity* and developed a measurement for both *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity*. In another study, Hartung and Renner (2011) found that *Social Curiosity* positively influenced people's capacity to judge others people's personalities in terms of *Extraversion*. Finally, Hartung and Renner (2013) examined the interrelations between *Social Curiosity* and *Gossip*, the "conversation about social and personal topics" (Hartung and Renner 2013, p. 1), and found that both these constructs were related yet distinct.

Research Model

According to *Uses and Gratifications Theory* (U&G), people will choose a medium and use it in such a way that it satisfies his/her desires. *Curiosity* is a human being's intrinsic "desire for [acquiring] new information and knowledge" (Renner 2006, p. 305). SNSs provide users with multiple possibilities to *observe* information and knowledge (cf. Subrahmanyam et al. 2008) and, hence, are able to satisfy individuals' *Curiosity*. Drawing from the U&G, we hypothesize that:

H1: *Curiosity positively influences Observing behavior.*

General Social Curiosity "describes a broad interest in the acquisition of new information about how other people behave, act and feel" (Renner 2006, p. 314). SNSs regularly provide specific *information about other individuals*, such as their actions, behaviors, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and core data (cf. Lo 2010). In other words, they provide information that is able to satisfy an individual's *General Social Curiosity*. Drawing again from the U&G, we hypothesize that:

H2: *General Social Curiosity positively influences Observing behavior.*

¹ According to the Need to Belong theory (e.g., Baumeister and Leary 1995; Watson and Johnson 1972), every person has, to some extent, a fundamental need to connect to other people and be accepted by them.

Covert Social Curiosity describes the interest to obtain interpersonal information by unobtrusive or covert exploratory behaviors (Renner 2006). While *observing* information in SNSs, individuals do not have to disclose anything about themselves since their corresponding actions are concealed by definition. More specifically, the information source is not aware of their actions, which means that *Observing* is an unobtrusive, covert behavior. Drawing once more from the U&G, we hypothesize that:

H3: *Covert Social Curiosity positively influences Observing behavior.*

Figure 2 summarizes our research model.

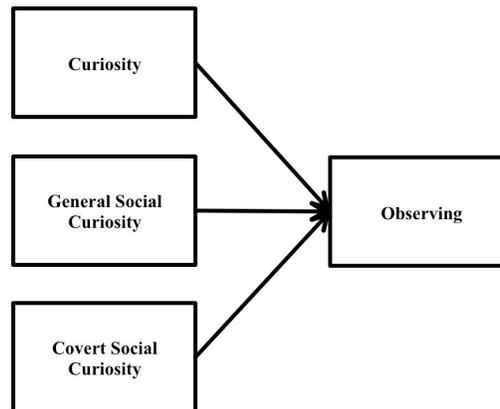


Figure 2. Research Model

Research Design

Data Collection

To empirically evaluate our research model, we surveyed German-speaking users of Facebook, the most popular SNS (cf. Alexa 2015). In this manner, we obtained 188 complete online questionnaires. 94 respondents were male (50 percent) and 94 were female (50 percent). The average age was 24.75 years (standard deviation: 6.81). 4 respondents were unemployed (2 percent), 6 were apprentices (3 percent), 31 were pupils (16 percent), 50 were in employment (27 percent), 94 were students (50 percent), and 3 selected “other” as a description of themselves (2 percent).

Measurement

Observing

To measure *Observing*, we first sought to build a list including all the things members can do on Facebook. In order to do this, we constructed an initial list of possible Facebook actions using the literature (e.g., Ross et al. 2009) and our own systematic examination of the Facebook website, the Facebook *Help Center* and the Facebook *Developers* documentation. Following this, we asked three Facebook members to check our list and, if necessary, add other actions to the list. Finally, we asked 292 students to name up to six behaviors they performed most often on Facebook. All of their answers were covered by the list we compiled, which contained 36 actions.

Next, we used the definitions of *Sharing* and *Observing* behavior we presented above, to classify these 36 actions according to the *Sharing* or *Observing* behaviors and asked three colleagues to do the same. Their classification supported ours: the 36 actions were divided into two categories, *Sharing* and *Observing*, with each category containing 18 actions (Table 1).

Finally, we built an 18-item formative scale for *Observing* as presented in Table 2 whose completeness is ensured: indeed, each *Observing* item we developed reflected the extent of usage of one of Facebook's *Observing* actions identified above (for example, the action “look at photos/videos others have uploaded” was surveyed via “I look at photos/videos that others uploaded to Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed)”). All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “very often” to “very rarely”.

| Sharing | Observing |
|---|---|
| <i>Facebook enables you to ...</i> | |
| “like” things | observe/read/look at other people’s “likes” |
| “post” information (e.g., status updates, on the Facebook profile of others, within groups) | observe/read/look at other people’s “posts” |
| “share” information | observe/read/look at others people’s “shared” information |
| “comment” on things (e.g., posts, photos, etc.) | observe/read/look at other people’s “comments” |
| update your Facebook profile | observe/read/look at information on Facebook profiles, company pages, product pages, etc. |
| upload photos/videos | look at photos/videos others have uploaded |
| send private messages | get/read private messages |
| poke someone | be poked |
| use apps (e.g., games) | observe/read/look at information depicting the apps used by others (e.g., games played) |
| tag yourself/someone (e.g., on photos) | observe/read/look at other people’s tags |
| create events | observe/read/look at events created by others |
| invite others to events | be invited to events |
| signal your event participation | observe/read/look at the participation of other people at an event |
| send friend requests | receive friend requests |
| confirm friend requests | observe/read/look at information about new Facebook friendships being formed |
| create groups | observe/read/look at information related to the creation of groups by other members |
| invite others to join groups | be invited to join groups |
| join groups | observe/read/look at information related to other people’s memberships to groups |

Table 1. Facebook’s Sharing and Observing Actions

| Labels | Items |
|--------|--|
| O1 | I observe/read/look at other people’s “likes” on Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O2 | I observe/read/look at other people’s “posts” on Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O3 | I observe/read/look at other people’s “shared” information on Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O4 | I observe/read/look at other people’s “comments” on Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O5 | I observe/read/look at information on Facebook profiles, company pages, product pages, etc. |
| O6 | I look at photos/videos that others uploaded to Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O7 | I get/read private messages that others send me on Facebook |
| O8 | I am poked on Facebook |
| O9 | I observe/read/look at information depicting the app usage of others on Facebook (e.g., information in my News Feed about the Facebook games other people have played) |
| O10 | I observe/read/look at other people’s tags on Facebook (e.g., "Friend A was tagged by Friend B on a photo") |
| O11 | I observe/read/look at events created by others on Facebook (e.g., birthday parties, festivals) |
| O12 | I am invited to events on Facebook (e.g., birthday parties, festivals) |
| O13 | I observe/read/look at the signaled participation of others ("Going", "Maybe", "Invited") in events (e.g., birthday parties, festivals) on Facebook |
| O14 | I receive friend requests on Facebook |
| O15 | I observe/read/look at information about new Facebook friendships being formed (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O16 | I observe/read/look at information related to the creation of groups by other members on Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |
| O17 | I am invited to join groups on Facebook |
| O18 | I observe/read/look at information related to other people’s memberships to groups on Facebook (e.g., in my News Feed) |

Table 2. Formative Items of Observing

Potential Influence Factors

For *Curiosity*, *General Social Curiosity*, and *Covert Social Curiosity*, we used existing and well-established reflective items and scales (Naylor 1981; Renner 2006). Table 3 presents the resulting

reflective items with their corresponding sources. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

| Construct | Items (Labels) | Source/adapted from |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Curiosity | I am curious about things (C1) | Naylor (1981) |
| | I feel inquisitive (C2) | |
| | I feel like seeking things out (C3) | |
| General Social Curiosity | When I meet a new person, I am interested in learning more about him/her (GSC1) | Renner (2006) |
| | I like to learn about the habits of others (GSC2) | |
| | I'm interested in other people's thoughts and feelings (GSC3) | |
| Covert Social Curiosity | When on the train, I like listening to other people's conversations (CSC1) | Renner (2006) |
| | Every so often, I like to stand at the window and watch what my neighbors are doing (CSC2) | |
| | I like to look into other people's lit windows (CSC3) | |

Table 3. Reflective Items of our Measurement Model

Results

Since our data was not distributed joint multivariate normal and since our measurement model included both reflective and formative indicators (cf. Hair et al. 2011), we used the *Partial-Least-Squares* approach via *SmartPLS 3.1.3* (Ringle et al. 2014). With 188 datasets, we met the larger suggested minimum sample size threshold of “ten times the largest number of formative indicators used to measure one construct” (Hair et al. 2011, p. 144). To test for significance, we used the integrated *Bootstrap* routine with 5,000 samples (Hair et al. 2011).

In the following, we will first evaluate our measurement model. Indeed, we will examine the *content validity*, *indicator reliability*, *construct reliability*, and *discriminant validity* of our reflective constructs. We will also assess the *content validity* of our formative *Observing* construct as well as the *weights/loadings* of its indicators and will also check for *multicollinearity*. Finally, we will present the results of our structural model.

Measurement Model

Reflective Constructs

For *Curiosity*, *General Social Curiosity*, and *Covert Social Curiosity*, we used common construct definitions and proven items of former studies. Hence, we assume that all the reflective constructs and measurements used here are both representative and comprehensive, thus suggesting their *content validity* (cf. Moon and Kim 2001).

Tables 4 and 5 present the correlations between constructs together with the *Average Variance Extracted* (AVE) and *Composite Reliability* (CR), and our reflective items' factor loadings, respectively: With the exception of one *Curiosity* item², all reflective items loaded high (.72 or more) and significant ($p < .001$) on their parent factor and, hence, met the suggested threshold of *indicator reliability* of .70 (Hair et al. 2011); AVE and CR were higher than .650 and .84, respectively, meeting the suggested *construct reliability* thresholds of .50/.70 (Hair et al. 2009). The loadings from our reflective indicators were highest for each parent factor and the square root of the AVE of each construct was larger than the absolute value of the construct's correlations with its counterparts, thus indicating *discriminant validity* (Fornell and Larcker 1981; Hair et al. 2011).

² *Curiosity's* item “I feel like seeking things out” (C3) only had a loading of .55 ($p < .05$). However, “indicators with loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 should only be considered for removal from the scale if deleting this indicator leads to an increase in composite reliability above the suggested threshold value” (Hair et al. 2011, p. 145). Since our measurement model met the suggested composite reliability threshold (Hair et al. 2009), we did not drop the corresponding item from our measurement model.

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---|
| | C | GSC | CSC | O |
| Curiosity (C) | .650 (.842) | | | |
| General Social Curiosity (GSC) | .331 | .652 (.848) | | |
| Covert Social Curiosity (CSC) | -.067 | .273 | .673 (.861) | |
| Observing (O) | .114 | .507 | .400 | - |

Table 4. Correlations between Constructs (AVE (CR) on the Diagonal)

| | | | | |
|------|-------------|--------------|--------------|------|
| | C | GSC | CSC | O |
| C1 | .838 (4.27) | .196 | .100 | .055 |
| C2 | .973 (5.14) | .357 | .047 | .129 |
| C3 | .550 (2.35) | .156 | .261 | .000 |
| GSC1 | .375 | .720 (8.68) | .037 | .324 |
| GSC2 | .147 | .855 (15.29) | .371 | .495 |
| GSC3 | .339 | .840 (19.17) | .188 | .381 |
| CSC1 | .021 | .316 | .790 (11.70) | .322 |
| CSC2 | .104 | .193 | .833 (14.78) | .377 |
| CSC3 | .027 | .155 | .837 (12.22) | .265 |

Table 5. Reflective Items' Loadings (T-Values)**Formative Construct**

Formative constructs are described and defined by their items (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). Hence, leaving out some relevant aspects would result in a mismatch of construct definition and measurement, and ultimately eliminate *content validity*. As described earlier, our *Observing* items were developed based on a carefully crafted classification of Facebook actions with each item measuring the extent of one *Observing* action. Assuming that the classification is complete and unambiguous, our formative *Observing* scale fulfills the requirements for *content validity* (cf. Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001).

Table 6 presents the *weights* and *loadings* of our formative items on their parent factor: Their examination shows that multiple formative items have no significant weight and/or loading. However, formative items must not be dropped from analyses (cf. Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001), but rather be kept in the model to retain *content validity* (Bollen and Lennox 1991). Also, as discussed by Hair et al. (2011), a formative scale consisting of many items likely presents multiple non-significant weights.

| Item Labels | Weights (t-values) | Loadings (t-values) | Item Labels [cont'd] | Weights (t-values) [cont'd] | Loadings (t-values) [cont'd] |
|-------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| O1 | .023 (.177) | .469 (3.187) | O10 | .088 (.860) | .566 (3.873) |
| O2 | .017 (.128) | .576 (4.489) | O11 | .100 (.956) | .470 (3.431) |
| O3 | -.261 (1.550) | .516 (3.968) | O12 | -.090 (.738) | .159 (1.395) |
| O4 | .321 (1.774) | .602 (4.546) | O13 | .053 (.473) | .456 (3.428) |
| O5 | .340 (2.406) | .682 (5.408) | O14 | -.164 (1.327) | .087 (.963) |
| O6 | .011 (.107) | .580 (4.490) | O15 | .702 (3.993) | .785 (5.985) |
| O7 | .152 (1.508) | .399 (3.281) | O16 | -.011 (.103) | .397 (3.176) |
| O8 | .085 (.711) | .205 (1.579) | O17 | .196 (1.403) | .109 (1.116) |
| O9 | .114 (1.014) | .379 (2.624) | O18 | -.493 (2.663) | .200 (1.723) |

Table 6. Formative Items' Weights/Loadings on their Parent Factor (T-Values)

Finally, the *Variance-Inflation-Factors* (VIFs) of *Observing* indicate that the construct does not suffer from *multicollinearity*: its highest VIF (3.34) was well below the suggested threshold of 5 (Hair et al. 2011).

Structural Model

Figure 3 presents the path coefficients of the previously hypothesized relationships as well as the R^2 of the endogenous variable (** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$, ns = non-significant).

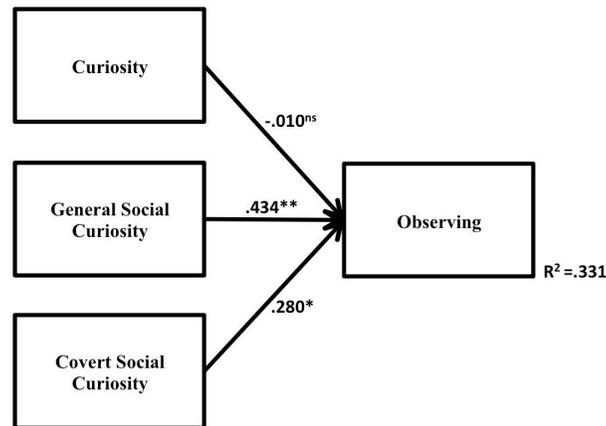


Figure 3. Findings

Overall, the explanatory power of our structural model is good since explaining 33.1 percent of the variances of *Observing* behavior. *General Social Curiosity* ($\beta = .434$, $p < .01$) and *Covert Social Curiosity* ($\beta = .280$, $p < .05$) were found to have a positive influence on *Observing* behavior, confirming hypotheses 2 and 3. In contrast, hypothesis 1 was not confirmed since generic *Curiosity* ($\beta = -.010$, $t = .072$) had no significant influence on *Observing* behavior.

These findings suggest that just being curious in a general sense is not enough to become attracted to SNSs' *Observing* functions. In fact, individuals need to have a *Curiosity for people*, which is consistent with the social focus of SNSs. More specifically, although SNSs are no longer exclusively about people, general news and information might potentially be found faster and more effectively through other media channels such as general Internet search engines. As a result, people might consider these other media channels to be more appropriate to gratify their general *Curiosity* and, in accordance with *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, choose these instead. In contrast, SNSs are an efficient medium to (covertly) observe information about other people and, hence, are able to gratify individuals' (*Covert*) *Social Curiosity*, ultimately driving SNS *Observing* behavior.

Conclusions

In this article, we studied three potential influence factors of *Observing* behavior in SNSs: *Curiosity*, *General Social Curiosity*, *Covert Social Curiosity*. After surveying 188 German-speaking Facebook users and applying a structural equation modeling approach, we confirmed that *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity* are positive influence factors of *Observing* behavior. In contrast, we are not able to confirm a corresponding influence of *Curiosity* and present possible explanations for the insignificance of this relationship.

In summary, our study contributes to SNS research by taking a look at *Observing* behavior, a type of SNS behavior that is regularly neglected. More specifically, we confirm that *General Social Curiosity* and *Covert Social Curiosity* are positive influence factors of *Observing* behavior. Moreover, our findings have important practical implications. Foremost, our findings suggest that SNS service providers need to focus on acquiring individuals that are curious about people as new members in order to increase the *Observing* behavior within their networks.

Our study has some limitations. More specifically, our empirical findings are only based on one specific SNS: Facebook. Hence, there might be differences between this particular SNS and others, especially those with a professional context such as *LinkedIn*.

As a next step, we plan to expand our research and address its limitations. More specifically, we want to evaluate *Observing* behavior in the context of professional SNSs. Indeed, the use of professional SNSs present alternative usage motivations: for example, one natural extrinsic motivation for using a professional SNS would be to further a personal career. We would like to take a closer look at these kinds of motivations and other context-specific stimuli. In doing so, we can identify and develop additional constructs that could be influencing *Observing* behavior in professional SNSs.

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