One Click, Many Meanings: Interpreting Paralinguistic Digital Affordances in Social Media

Rebecca A. Hayes, Caleb T. Carr, and Donghee Yvette Wohn

In this study we conceptualize cues in social media that require a single click (e.g., Likes, Favorites) as paralinguistic digital affordances (PDAs). Why do people use PDAs and how do they interpret them when they are the recipient? Through focus groups (N = 25) and interviews (N = 26) we address these research questions within a uses and gratifications framework. Using adaptive structuration theory as a lens for analysis, we examine both faithful and ironic uses of PDAs, finding they contribute more than phatic communication and may indicate just as much about the relationship between sender and receiver as they do content.

Introduction

One of the most common affordances of social media is the ability to Like,[1] Favorite, +1, or Upvote. As individuals and organizations upload billions of content items to social media daily (Tam, 2012), other users utilize these one-click tools to signal a response. But what do these lightweight signals *mean*, to both the users sending and receiving these cues? This question is particularly interesting as a frequent occurrence in social media is for a user to utilize the same cue for posts of vastly different valences. For example, a Facebook user may Like one status update extoling a microbrew, only to immediately Like a different post announcing a cancer diagnosis. Thus, a single click may be sent and interpreted in a variety of ways.

Rebecca A. Hayes (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is an assistant professor of public relations at Illinois State University. Her research focuses on the brand and political uses and effects of social media, and the general technological affordances of social media.

Caleb T. Carr (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is an assistant professor of communication in the School of Communication at Illinois State University. His research addresses how new media alter communicative processes, including how social media are used for organizational uncertainty reduction and to create, maintain, and affect identity online.

Donghee Yvette Wohn (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is an assistant professor of information systems at New Jersey Institute of Technology. She studies human-computer interaction and social media effects.

This research sought to understand the communicative functions users give to these simple tools, untangling the complex meaning users may ascribe to communicating via a single click, and additionally how the idiosyncrasies of individual social media may affect that meaning. We first conceptualize these tools as paralinguistic digital affordances (PDAs), explicating them as representative of phatic communication in their design but possibly not in their usage. Then, guided by uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), we report the results of qualitative research utilizing interviews and focus groups, conducted to examine the meanings both the sender and receiver ascribe to these tools. Responses were analyzed through the theoretical lens of adaptive structuration theory (AST; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), and results suggest the diversity of nomenclature for these one-click means of interactions is paralleled by the meanings to which social media users ascribe their use and receipt.

Literature Review

Communication in Social Media

Social media are "internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 7). Approximately 70% of global Internet users (and 74% of users within the United States) actively use social media (Pew Research Internet Project, 2014), with the most trafficked platforms being the social network sites (SNSs) Facebook, Twitter, QZone, and Google+; and the professional networking site LinkedIn (Statista, 2014).

Social media afford multiple means of communication, enabling interactions among users through self-presentation and exchanges that are concurrently mass (i.e., one-to-many messages) and interpersonal (i.e., one-to-one messages) messages (Walther, Tong, DeAndrea, Carr, & Van Der Heide, 2011). Communication within social media can include substantive and meaningful exchanges among close relational ties, such as messages within social support groups (Wright, 2002) or private messages among close friends and family (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). Social media additionally afford lightweight communication among weak and latent relational ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), as users can passively observe friends or craft small messages to others. In all, social media platforms often enable multiple tools for user interaction, ranging from complex multichannel messages to paralinguistic cues.

Paralinguistic Digital Affordances in Social Media. Technical tools of social media that enable user activity (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011) have changed over time, but one tool that has remained relatively constant is the ability to engage in lightweight acts of communication such as the Like (Instagram, Facebook), Favorite (Twitter), +1 (Google+), or Upvote (Reddit and Imgur). We conceptualize these features as *paralinguistic digital affordances* (PDAs): cues in social media that

facilitate communication and interaction without specific language associated with their messages. Engaging in PDAs represents one of the most common behaviors on social media, and their use is included in many measures of social network use; however, the meaning and motivations behind users' behavior remain unexplored.

Phatic Communication in Social Media.   Phatic communication is, "language used in free, aimless, social intercourse" (Malinowski, 1972, p.142) that displays sociability, but is comprised of limited, or no, real information. It is a "minimalist communicative practice" (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson, 1992, p. 210) that is increasingly becoming a part of online media culture due to a lack of focus on exchanging substantive content (Miller, 2008). Small talk, such as "How are you," exemplifies phatic communication in face-to-face contexts, as the purpose of the question is less about wanting to know the other person's state and more about opening up the possibility for further communication (Coupland et al., 1992).

While early work on phatic communication focused on language, more recent work includes nonverbal behaviors, in tandem with the development of technologies designed for phatic purposes. Phatic technologies are those that are primarily used to establish, develop, and maintain human relationships (Wang, Tucker, & Rihll, 2011) rather than convey specific information. In this respect, PDAs were intended by social media designers to serve phatic purposes (Langley, 2014).

Though the designers of these tools intended phatic uses for these PDAs, their usage and meanings may have developed beyond the scope of their original intent. From a social construction of technology (SCOT; Pinch & Bijker, 1987) perspective, meanings and uses of new technology are not shaped exclusively by their engineers, but by the social norms that develop around use and by users. For example, the designers of Foursquare, a location-based social network service, originally intended for check-ins to be a part of a competitive game; but Frith (2014) found that check-ins had many meanings for users, served a very functional purpose in social coordination, and few users actually thought of them as part of a game. Consequently, the actual motivations for use and meaning on receiving of PDAs among users could be different from the creators' intentions.

Value of Communication in Social Media.   Carr and Hayes (2015) posited that a social medium's users decide its value, reiterating Shirky's (2010) contention that the innate rewards of providing and interacting with site content contributes to the popularity and utility of social media. Both the technical and social infrastructures of various media may afford different cues, interactions, relational contexts, and perceived values to its users. Papacharissi (2009) noted users of Facebook, LinkedIn, and ASmallWorld utilized each service differently for self-presentation, interaction, and goal attainment given the affordances of each service; and Carr (2011) found individuals interpret identical messages differently dependent on the context of the social network site in which the message is observed.

Given the value of a social medium and its affordances to users seem to be idiosyncratic by site, the meaning and motivations behind use of a technological affordance may, too, be idiosyncratic, as users may utilize similar affordances to

achieve different goals or communicate different intended meaning across various services. Therefore, to understand whether and how similar affordances (i.e., phatic cues) may be used for distinct communicative purposes within different social media, we ask the guiding question:

RQ$_1$: Does the meaning of a PDA differ by social media platform?

Theoretical Foundations

Uses and Gratifications. Uses and gratifications (U&G) is a psychological communication perspective that posits that audience members are active and goal-oriented media consumers who select media channels and messages to satisfy different needs (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 1994). It assumes users are aware of their interests and motives and have individual expectations of media that aid in their media choice and needs gratification.

While U&G has been criticized for its vague conceptual framework, lack of explanatory power, overuse of the active audiences' assumptions, and for being too individualistic (Alhabash & McAlister, 2015; Rayburn, 1996), the approach has seen extensive application in social media research (e.g., Smock et al., 2011; Wohn & Lee, 2013) and is appropriate to investigate why media consumers use a technology and its affordances (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2010). Smock et al. (2011) argued that social media tools are utilized in different ways to meet the differing needs of users and as such, to truly understand the motivations for use of social media, researchers should be focusing on specific features in the toolkit of affordances a social medium provides. However, their research was conducted just before Facebook introduced the Like in 2009; thus the motivations behind its use, and similar PDA features on other social media, remain unknown. It is especially important to examine the uses and gratifications of PDAs across multiple platforms as most prior research on social media motivations focus on one platform or one specific feature (e.g., Chung & Yoo, 2008; Lai & Yang, in press). We are thus interested in identifying the reasons people use PDAs, using U&G as a framework to understand that behavior:

RQ$_2$: What motivations drive use of a PDA?

While research employing the U&G approach has mainly examined the gratifications individuals seek when engaging in a particular media-related behavior, the framework does not cover the gratifications of the person who is the target of that behavior. Though more recent studies examine interactivity (Yoo, 2011), most extant U&G research focuses on the initiator of the behavior (Sundar & Limperos, 2013) rather than the receiver. This has not posed a problem in traditional media research because, unlike social media, the media channels being studied did not offer interactivity. Thus, in the context of PDAs, it may be equally important to examine the gratifications associated with the receiver end of the dyad:

RQ₃: What gratifications are associated with receiving a PDA?

Adaptive Structuration Theory. DeSanctis and Poole (1994) proposed adaptive structuration theory (AST) to consider the mutual influence of technology and social processes, noting the recursive relationship of the technology (and its use or lack of use) and the social processes involving the technology. AST acknowledges groups can appropriate the spirit of a technology in one of two ways: faithfully or ironically. In *faithful* appropriation, the group (both in structure and in social processes) follows the spirit of the technology, using it as intended by the developer(s). In *ironic* appropriation, the group uses a technology in a way that violates its intended spirit. AST has been effectively utilized to explore uses (both intended and novel) of communicative tools, even as lightweight as a phone's ringer. Donner (2008) looked at Rwandan teens' use of predetermined patterns of unanswered rings and hang-ups to signal friends and family members without incurring the phone charges.

Many sites enabling PDAs explicate their intended purpose and most of these explications center around the expression of positive emotion toward a post. Facebook (2014) defines their Like feature as, "an easy way to let people know that you enjoy [a post] without leaving a comment" and Twitter (2014) espouses their Favorite as a way to, "let the original poster know that you liked their Tweet." Reddit (2014) explicates an Upvote as, "If you think something contributes to conversation, upvote it." PDAs are faithfully adopted when users literally enjoy the content and seek to display positive socioemotional attributions directly toward the post. It is therefore notable that faithful appropriation of PDAs acknowledges attributions about the content without inferring attributions about the poster, the context of the post, or the cultural or societal meanings that may be related to but beyond the scope of the post.

However, users could ascribe additional meaning to PDAs beyond their faithful structures and adopt PDAs ironically as a means of ascribing meaning beyond the post's content, potentially including to indicate meaning toward the poster, the context, or even signal the PDA provider's own identity. Perhaps a Like does not mean that one literally felt affinity toward the content, nor does Favoriting a post indicate the post is preferred over others, and users instead have adopted their own meaning and use of these tools specific to the media, their social connections, and their communicative goals. Thus, a research question is posed to understand how individuals *actually* use and ascribe meanings to these PDAs through the lens of AST:

RQ₄: What are the a) faithful and b) ironic motivations of PDAs by the sender?

Yet, PDAs are not discrete, objective messages: They are decoded as well as encoded. Thus, in addition to the motivations for generating PDAs, there may be faithful and ironic interpretations of those receiving and perceiving PDAs. While a receiver may interpret a PDA faithfully as the sender displaying positive socioemotional attributions toward her or his posted message, so too may a receiver ironically decode and interpret the meaning of the PDA. Thus, we want to understand how receivers ascribe meaning to PDAs:

RQ$_5$: What are a) faithful and b) ironic interpretations of PDAs by the receiver?

Method

We employed a qualitative approach, as it "frees the investigator from the burden of forcing *a priori* standards on an audience" (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1982, p. 3). A qualitative method is particularly useful in the context of the current study because certain motivations, especially those that are "ironic" in nature, would be difficult to construct *a priori*. To answer these exploratory research questions, this study employed both focus groups and semi-structured interviews to overcome limitations associated with each method and sampling bias.

Focus Groups

Social media are inherently interactive; therefore it was vital to employ a methodology that allowed interaction between users to explore their experiences with social media use. Focus groups facilitate insights about attitudes and perceptions by observing and recording interactions between respondents (Krueger, 2009), which can generate insights not possible in an individual setting as participants' responses build on each other. Focus groups are particularly valuable for exploring uses of new technology (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), and allow researchers to fully explore the customs of social media use in social, natural context.

Participants. Focus group participants (*N* = 25) were recruited from undergraduate classes at a mid-sized Midwestern university in exchange for extra credit. Two focus groups lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted, consisting of 12 and 13 participants. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 22 (*M* = 21), 20 were female, and were of diverse ethnicities.

Procedure. Focus groups were held in a campus setting and were audio recorded. A short questionnaire inquiring about demographics and social platforms used and preferred was administered before discussion began. Topics ranged from personal uses and interpretations of social media affordances to how participants thought their friends interpret social media affordances.

Semi-structured Interviews

Though focus groups are useful in observing how people dynamically engage and interact, they are limited by their inability to probe further into the thoughts of each participant. Moreover, social dynamics of the group can prevent individuals who perceive themselves to have a minority opinion from expressing themselves.

Therefore, we conducted separate semi-structured interviews to address the short-comings of focus groups while maintaining a similar structure in terms of the question protocol.

Participants. Interview respondents (N = 26) were recruited in urban locations in the greater New York City area through convenience sampling. Because the focus group participants were college students with social science majors, we over-sampled engineering and science-related majors and non-students. Respondents ages ranged from 19 to 41 (M = 25), were evenly split by gender, and were of diverse ethnicities.

Procedure. Interviews about 30 minutes in length were held in a campus setting and were audio recorded for later transcription. Research assistants conducted interviews using a script based on the focus group protocol, modified to work in a one-on-one setting.

Results

Across the focus groups and interviews, participants identified using several social media platforms. All participants had and used Facebook and Twitter accounts, reflecting the two dominant platforms subsequently discussed. While interview respondents focused on these two platforms, focus groups additionally addressed Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Reddit, and Google+ in descending order.

PDAs Across Platforms

RQ$_1$ inquired whether the meaning of a PDA differed by platform. One of the first questions asked participants to describe whether Likes, Favorites, and Upvotes meant the same thing to them. The majority of respondents indicated the meaning of these cues were not synonymous.

A common theme was the relative devaluation of Facebook Likes, which were perceived as more common. Participants repeatedly noted that when scrolling through their feeds, their PDA behavior on Facebook is more reactionary than on other platforms, based somewhat on the poster rather than the posted content. "Oh, my friend posted a photo. Like" (Sally[2], 21). On Facebook, the act of aimlessly providing Likes in reaction to seeing their Friends, rather than actually processing the content, seemed to manifest itself in participants' expectations for a threshold level of Likes a post needed to receive to be "good." Participants questioned the value of a post not achieving that threshold level of Likes, and sometimes deleted an unsuccessful post.

This was not the case on Twitter: "Lots of posts go by with no Favorites. It isn't weird" (Olivia, 22), and "Once you tweet it, it's gone" (Josie, 19). On Twitter, the

content had to be "good" to get Favorited, though what "good" meant seemed to vary, with criteria including content perceived as funny, thought provoking, or ironic. "I actually read what is being posted on Twitter versus just scrolling through and seeing what's going on" (Lizzie, 22).

Liking on Instagram was a more selective behavior. Women in the focus groups said their friends paid attention to how many Instagram PDAs they received and from whom. Though few participants had experience with Reddit, one male participant noted that Upvotes were a form of social currency—the more Upvotes you accumulated, the higher your "internet karma"—and indicated his subsequent posts would be taken more seriously as a result. It was clear different meanings were attributed to PDAs sent and received across social media platforms, differences most manifest in a threshold level of PDAs, varying by both users and platform, for users to be confident in the quality of posted content.

Motivations for PDA Use

RQ$_2$ probed the motivations behind use of PDAs. Four motivations for senders' use of PDAs were identified: literal interpretation, acknowledgement of viewing, social support and grooming, and utilitarian purposes.

Literal Interpretation. Some participants interpreted PDAs literally as an evaluation of the content to which they were responding. Participants liked Facebook content they actually liked: "If it's something that makes me laugh, I'll Like it. Or if it's a meme that says something that actually makes sense, I'll Like it" (Denzel, 41). Certain types of content seemed to lend themselves to literal Likes, including celebrity news, pets, humor, and new product releases. Those who interpreted the Like literally refused to provide the PDA if they *dis*liked the content. Andy (22), a fan of basketball player LeBron James, said that he Liked photos of the athlete but avoided Liking posts that criticized James.

On Reddit, the Upvote was interpreted literally as to the extent the user sought to promote the content up to the front page of Reddit through the site's voting mechanism. Likewise, as an explicated use of Favorites is to save broadcast content for later reference, many focus group participants noted this use on Twitter, especially for professional tips and knowledge shared by sources within their chosen industry.

Acknowledgement of Viewing. Particularly when discussing Facebook and Instagram, a few participants suggested PDAs were a way to acknowledge they had seen a post. Participants described Liking as "a subtle recognition," "affirmation of someone's post," and "OK, will do" when there was a request of them. A few participants similarly reported Favoriting on Twitter as a way to signal they had seen the post. Some participants noted Liking or Favoriting purely to prevent people from asking them questions such as, "Did you see the

photo I posted?" when they knew their Friends were tracking who had Liked a post.

Social Support/Grooming. Participants also noted that they utilized PDAs as a form of social support. "[Facebook Likes are] like saying, 'Hey! Good job!' It's a sign of general communication and acceptance that we're on the same page," said Carolyn (23). Several participants talked about how significant life events or achievements, such as weight loss, always warrant using PDAs to show their support, saying, as Jake (22) explained, "That's awesome!" Some talked about how they felt when something they posted didn't get enough attention, and as a result would Like their close friends' content profusely so this didn't happen to them.

This social support also had an aspect of social grooming, as participants would respond to others' content through PDAs because they felt obliged to do so as a part of relationship maintenance. Several participants discussed that they had to "Like back" or reciprocate to preserve the relationship. The concept of "Like Whores" emerged in one focus group following one participant's disclosure that, "I have a friend who is so insecure, she won't leave the house without checking her outfit with whoever's online; and I know it is important to her, so I roll my eyes and Like that Instagram photo" (Kelly, 21). A few participants also said they utilized PDAs if they wanted to develop a better relationship with the other person. Using PDAs for social grooming was more prevalent on Facebook than on other social media.

Utilitarian Purposes. A few participants used PDAs as a means of keeping a record of particular content. In these cases, the participant did not view the PDA as being *sent* to the content poster, but rather as a personal archival tool. Only some social media, however, supported this behavior. Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram have an easy function of allowing users to see PDAed content. "With Liking on Tumblr, you can go back to the things that you Like. On Facebook, there really isn't any kind of function that lets you do that with content that you Like, and if there is, it's not very easy" (David, 22). Twitter's Favorite button was particularly used as an archival tool, with users noting that it was interesting to revisit old favorites. "I use Twitter for a lot of industry stuff, and when I find a good article or something, I'll Favorite to save it for later" (Quinn, 20).

Gratifications of Receiving PDAs

RQ$_3$ probed the gratifications of receiving PDAs. Three main gratifications of receiving PDAs emerged: emotional, status, and social gratifications.

Emotional Gratification. Participants reported feeling happy when they received a PDA and unhappy when they did not. Kyle, 22, said he would "feel sad" if no one Liked his photos on Instagram. Several participants discussed how receiving a Like

on certain types of content made them feel better: "It feels pretty good. I've like struggled with weight loss and stuff, and like body image issues. So definitely, I get more excited than I should when I get Likes, on a picture" (Emma, 21). Another form of emotional gratification was a feeling of self-worth. Sophia (39) said she feels emotional gratification when people Like content that she feels has high informational value because she "helped someone out." However, emotional gratification could erode over time. Linda (31) noted that when she was first on Instagram, receiving Likes would make her feel special; but now that she has been using it for a couple of years Likes no longer have this effect.

Status Gratification. Receiving PDAs was also associated with boosts in social status. Participants discussed how people brag about how much feedback their content draws. "The Likes are sort of like a status. People are just like, 'I have five million Likes or thousands of Likes'" (Alan, 20). A few participants said this status boost was more prominent if it was unexpected or if they did not frequently get PDAs on their own content. "It makes me feel like, 'Oh somebody paid attention to me! Someone's actually interested in what I'm sharing!' And it's … it's a nice feeling, it's a nice little ego boost for like, 3 seconds" (Tanya, 22). Because the PDAs on Reddit are explicitly tied with the systems internal ranking and hierarchy, users seemed to accept there would be status gratification as one's content was Upvoted.

However, some participants did not perceive status gratification positively, describing it as a trait seen in others but not themselves. "Some people may take it too seriously, like if getting Likes is the thing to do and it makes you cool if you get an excessive amount of Likes. It can be like an ego boost for some individuals who have self-esteem issues, which to me is pointless, especially when you have thousands of followers that you don't even know" (Joe, 24).

Social Gratification. The final theme identified was the development or enhancement of interpersonal relationships via PDAs. Several participants discussed how using PDAs, especially via Twitter, helped form or maintain relationships outside of social media. They described receiving PDAs as reminders of the other person and their relationship. "Liking makes me more aware of the friendship because it's sort of a reminder of them every time I see that they liked something" (Brianna, 25). Similarly, George (31) said that PDAs, though nothing like meeting in person, served as an easy way of maintaining relationships. Others mentioned they had found "Twitter friends" who they didn't know in real life, but knew based on their personalities and content via Twitter, and interacted with on a semi-regular basis. "There's this girl in California, I think, who tweets a show I watch, and I Favorited some of her stuff, and she followed me. We tweet back and forth now during the show" (Olivia, 22).

Beyond fostering online relationships, the exchange of casual PDAs sometimes led to unexpected relationships offline. Elizabeth (27) related an offline relationship developed from the initial exchange of Facebook Likes:

My fiancé now was just a stranger on Facebook but we had mutual friends. We used to Like each other's posts all the time because we were both going through a similar situation and we would relate to it. Eventually we started to talk through messages on Facebook and that lead to exchanging phone numbers which actually lead to a date and now three years later were engaged. How crazy is that?

Several respondents noted PDAs are likewise means of fostering new professional connections, such as by sending or receiving Favorites to Tweets to content and hashtags indicating information salient to their profession.

Faithful and Ironic Uses

RQ_4 and RQ_5 sought to investigate the faithful and ironic meanings encoded and decoded by senders and receivers of PDAs, respectively. The analyses of RQ_2 and RQ_3 suggest both faithful and ironic adoption of PDAs as cues both sent and received.

Faithful Appropriation.   Users acknowledged faithful appropriations of PDAs, most evident in the literal interpretations of PDAs, utilizing the cues for their denotative purposes: addressing properties of posted content. Discussing how they learned the social norms of different social media sites, participants mentioned they took some cues from what features were called to learn their meaning, suggesting that users initially adopted the site creators' intended meanings. On Facebook, a Like "… doesn't mean much beyond I've appreciated it, it was funny or whatever" (Jake, 22); and on Twitter, "Since I see tweets from so many different people, I have to really like something to Favorite it, it has to be worth me actually reading it" (Melody, 20).

In discussing what to do when content is sad or disturbing (e.g., an obituary), participants noted the phrasing of a post was important and at most times of grief, commenting might be more appropriate than a PDA. For example, "RIP Grandma," would necessitate commenting, while a PDA may be utilized for, "My grandma passed away last night, the conclusion of a life filled with love," since the PDA would validate the sentiment, not the event. These responses indicate PDAs are both sent and received faithfully, specifically when the cue is used to address properties of the posted content.

Ironic Appropriation.   Though faithful appropriations were acknowledged, ironic appropriations of PDAs emerged as a frequent use and gratification for senders and receivers, respectively. The most prevalent ironic appropriation across social media platforms was the use of PDAs for social motives toward the message poster, rather than the content itself. Sarah, 22, said, "When someone tweets at me and there isn't really anything for me to do, I'll just Favorite it." In addition, the discussion of "Like

Whores" indicated some people would just Like their friends' content to avoid the inevitable offline, "Did you see my post?!" or, "Why didn't you like that?!"

Other ironic adoptions included social support and reciprocity. For example, Jake, 22, commented, "Both Twitter and Facebook are great to commiserate with people —someone else is having a bad day, and they post about and you Like it because you feel them." Reciprocity was addressed by Josh (22) who said, "We all have that one person who favorites everything we post. I kinda' feel obligated to do the same, and I at least Favorite some of their stuff I don't think I would otherwise." The use of PDAs as social support or validation reveals that the ironic appropriations of PDAs may be more widespread and salient to social media users than the faithful appropriations of PDAs.

Discussion

PDAs: Phatic Cues and More

Our results, mostly from young adults, provide a broad picture of the uses and gratifications of paralinguistic digital affordances, and how they enable phatic communication within the social media environment. Participants actively discussed using PDAs as phatic cues, particularly on Facebook where Liking was often articulated as a nearly aimless, automated communicative action, regardless of the sender's content and without specific meaning attributed to either transmission or receipt of a Like. Yet PDAs are more than phatic cues, serving both meaningful communicative and banal utilitarian purposes, including acknowledgements, interpersonal and social networking mechanisms, and archival and retrieval tools.

Uses and Gratifications

Across all platforms, users noted both intentional and reactionary motivations for their use and interpretation of PDAs. Social motivations and desire for status were consistent with categories found in previous U&G research of social network sites (Lai & Yang, in press; Smock et al., 2011) and new media in general (Sundar & Limperos, 2013), particularly the use of an online tool as a means of human interactivity (Chung & Yoo, 2008; Yoo, 2011). Previous research has also focused on the sociability enabled by interactive media (e.g., Yoo, 2011), which was apparent in the present data as users utilized PDAs interactively to acknowledge content or send phatic feedback. However, the qualitative method also uncovered a new use not yet addressed in U&G studies: utilitarian motivations. Participants reported Favoriting and Liking content in Twitter and Instagram, respectively, to later retrieve content, suggesting a practical, information-oriented use.

Some participants indicated their use of PDAs was much less considered, often clicking the Like or Favorite function out of habit without considering the content.

This non-conscious, almost mindless behavior supports LaRose's (2010) theory that much of media use is habitual. Ritualistic or habitual use can suggest a less active audience (Ruggiero, 2000), as users engage less with the medium and its content, doing so only peripherally and without cognitive effort into processing mediated messages. Participants paradoxically reported engaging in such habitual PDA behaviors without consideration of the content, but subsequently ascribing meaning to the PDA they received that may well have been habitually clicked by a friend.

Taken together, an important finding of this research is that, reflective of the SCOT (Pinch & Bijker, 1987), the normative uses and gratifications of PDAs are distinct for those sending and receiving PDAs. When discussing receiving PDAs, participants did not reflect on or seek to divine a PDA sender's intent, instead receiving gratification from the PDA independently of the sender's encoded meaning. In other words, even though participants acknowledged sometimes haphazardly Liking and Upvoting content, when discussing receiving PDA and the meaning of the cue they did not consider someone clicking the button on their post could have likewise clicked out of boredom, instead ascribing meaning to the phatic cue. Future work addressing PDAs should therefore consider the perspectives of the sender and receiver, and the unique uses and gratification of each.

Adaptive Structuration of PDAs

Another original finding of this research is the faithful and ironic adoption of PDAs as system and communicative features within various social media platforms, extending our findings beyond their mere use. As what may be a use and/or gratification within one social medium may not hold for another social medium, AST can serve as an effective lens to understand how individuals are using PDAs without constraining analysis to a particular phatic cue or medium. At least in some ways, users are conforming to the infrastructure and explicated affordances of social media tools, using features as intended, to faithfully indicate they "like" a post or denote some content as their "favorite" amongst other posts. But perhaps more interesting and novel from these focus groups are users' ironic uses of PDA.

Results reveal several ironic appropriations of PDAs, extending beyond the tools' explicated and intended uses. Though some PDAs were used as intrapersonal tools (e.g., Favoriting a tweet to enable retrieval), most participants acknowledged PDAs as interpersonal tools, enabling interaction without expending time or cognitive resources to construct more complex messages, and reinforcing prior findings of the benefit of social media for lightweight maintenance of weak and latent ties (Ellison et al., 2007) and provision of social support (Guo, Li, & Ito, 2014). Though dependent on the phraseology of a post, PDAs may be used to signal social support, affirm, maintain, or develop interpersonal ties, or to demonstrate solidarity with an individual or espoused cause. This social support function reaffirms one of the most ironic uses of PDAs, whereby an individual may utilize the cue to communicate support toward a poster that was a direct contradiction to the faithful appropriation of the PDA with regard to the

message content. For example, Liking a friend's post about failing a test does not faithfully indicate a sender's fondness for their friend's failure, but rather is both sent and interpreted as a message of support following an undesirable performance.

An additional ironic appropriation of PDAs appears to be their use as interactive tools. Participants revealed a more complex use of PDAs as means of providing feedback to message senders, utilizing PDAs to interact with others nonverbally. Several participants noted the reciprocal nature of PDAs, suggesting some content was Liked/Favorited/+1ed not due to the nature of the content, but rather because of the social norm and expectation of reciprocity. As the poster had previously Liked/Favorited/+1ed the participant's content, the individual felt obligated to occasionally provide a reciprocal phatic cue to the poster, potentially as a means of actively maintaining reciprocal levels of disclosure and interaction as expected by social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The social demonstration not only enables users to acknowledge a user's social media content, but does so in a way that the PDA is visible to others, thus serving as a means of interacting mass personally with the content, the poster, and a broader audience.

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they expand many conceptualizations of messages when considering that giving single, uniform phatic cue like a PDA can convey several messages depending on the social medium, relationship between interactants, social context, content being PDAed, and likely combinations thereof. Thus, theory—particularly regarding communication in social media—may need to be developed to take into account both the explicated cue and the ironic interpretations of senders and receivers as they encode and decode the same signal differently based on complex interactions of communicative and relational sources. Practically, developers may need not worry so much about the particular verbiage of their tool's PDA given that users often expand its use beyond its initial semantic intention; but developers should simultaneously consider that PDAs may represent a substantive amount of communication within a social medium both quantitatively (given the billions of PDAs used each year) and qualitatively (given the myriad of meanings each PDA may carry).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations in the present work are worth noting, as they bound the findings and afford opportunities for future study. First, results are not intended to be representative or generalizable; and rather serve to identify the variety of uses and gratifications of PDA use. Future work can build from the identified uses to develop and empirically assess the frequency, antecedents, and effects of PDA use across broader demographic samples and research methods.

Related, future work should more carefully probe the differences in use across individual social media tools. Our data did not enable comparisons based on the nature of the social medium or type of content posted to which the PDA is used. Others (e.g., Napoli, 2011) have noted the nature of interactivity may be, in part, a

product of the channel more than the individuals using the tool, and it may be that a PDA on a channel for predominantly social or interpersonal interaction (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) is qualitatively different than a PDA on a corporate or organizationally-focused social medium (e.g., LinkedIn, IBM's Beehive). Likewise, data from this study imply differences may exist in the use and meaning of PDAs based on content, for example whether the initial post was text or photograph; but are not sufficient to draw conclusions. Future studies should further explore the nature of the medium, the interactivity therein, and the initial posts that elicit PDAs and their individual and interactive effects on the use and meaning of PDAs as phatic cues.

Conclusion

The social norms and vernacular of social media may be increasingly compli-cated, as users Like posts they do not actually like, Favorite banal tweets from celebrities to feel connected, and +1 inconsequential content. The meaning behind these simple features—all representing paralinguistic digital affordances—can be, but is not always, complex and rich, even if activated by a single click within their respective social medium. Though there were common uses and gratifications of PDAs across social media, most meanings of PDAs were idiosyn-cratic to each social medium (e.g., Facebook Likes were used and interpreted differently than Twitter Favorites), often guided by social norms, and frequently were a stronger message about the PDA sender rather than the social media content. Though just a click, PDAs may have many meanings, reflecting the diversity of social media platforms; and may be entire complex messages provid-ing intrapersonal and interpersonal meaning to social media users, depending on system, social, and structural factors. Just as a thumbs-up can seek to hitch a ride or indicate approval, so too can it convey different meaning online depending on the social context in which it is raised.

Notes

1. We differentiate the PDAs of various social media platforms (e.g., Like, Favorite) and their corresponding practices from the colloquial terms (e.g., liking, favorite) by capitalizing the former. Terminology reported is consistent with the data collection date of October, 2014.
2. All participants have been given pseudonyms, consistent with their gender, to maintain anonymity.

References

Alhabash, S., & McAlister, A. R. (2015). Redefining virality in less broad strokes: Predicting viral behavioral intentions from motivations and uses of Facebook and Twitter. *New Media & Society*, *17*, 1317–1339. doi:10.1177/1461444814523726

Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Carr, C. T. (2011). *Online information and implications for perceptions of applicants' organizational fit: A test of two mechanisms*. (Ph.D. Dissertation), Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A. (2015). Social media: Defining, developing, and divining. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, *23*. doi:10.1080/15456870.2015.972282

Chung, D. S., & Yoo, C. Y. (2008). Audience motivations for using interactive features: Distinguishing use of different types of interactivity on an online newspaper. *Mass Communication and Society*, *11*, 375–397. doi:10.1080/15205430701791048

Coupland, J., Coupland, N., & Robinson, J. D. (1992). "How are you?:" Negotiating phatic communion. *Language in Society*, *21*, 207–230. doi:10.1017/S0047404500015268

DeSanctis, G., & Poole, M. S. (1994). Capturing the complexity in advanced technology use: Adaptive structuration theory. *Organizational Science*, *5*, 121–147. doi:1047-7039/94/0502/0121

Donner, J. (2008). The rules of beeping: Exchanging messages via intentional "missed calls" on mobile phones. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*, 1–22. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00383.x

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *12*, 1143–1168. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x

Facebook. (2014). Like. *Desktop Help*. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/help/452446998120360

Frith, J. (2014). Communicating through location: The understood meaning of the Foursquare check-in. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *19*, 890–905. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12087

Gilbert, E., & Karahalios, K. (2009). Predicting tie strength with social media. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 211–220. New York, NY: ACM.

Guo, Y., Li, Y., & Ito, N. (2014). Exploring the predicted effect of social networking site use on perceived social capital and psychological well-being of Chinese international students in Japan. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *17*, 52–58.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *37*, 509–523. doi:10.1086/268109

Krueger, R. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lai, C-Y., & Yang, H-L. (In press). Determinants and consequences of Facebook feature use. *New Media & Society*. doi:10.1177/1461444814555959. Retrieved from http://nms.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/10/17/1461444814555959.abstract

Langley, H. (2014). Creator of the Facebook "Like" explains why you'll never get a "Dislike" button. *techradad*. Retrieved from http://www.techradar.com/news/internet/creator-of-the-facebook-like-explains-why-you-ll-never-get-a-dislike-button-1269788

LaRose, R. (2010). The problem of media habits. *Communication Theory*, *20*, 194–222. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01360.x

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2010). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Malinowski, B. (1972). Phatic communion. In J. Laver & S. Hutchinson (Eds.), *Communication in face-to-face interaction*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

McLeod, J. M., Bybee, C. R., & Durall, J. A. (1982). Evaluating media performance by gratification sought and received. *Journalism Quarterly, 59*, 3–12, 59. doi:10.1177/107769908205900101

Miller, V. (2008). New media, networking and phatic culture. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *14*, 387–400. doi:10.1177/1354856508094659

Napoli, P. M. (2011). *Audience evolution: New technologies and the transformation of media audiences*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual geographies of social networks: A comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New Media & Society*, *11*, 199–220. doi:10.1177/1461444808099577

Papacharissi, Z., & Mendelson, A. (2010). Toward a new(er) sociability: Uses, gratifications and social capital on Facebook. In S. Papathanassopoulos (Ed.), *Media perspectives for the 21st century* (pp. 212–230). New York, NY: Routledge.

Pew Research Internet Project. (2014, January). Social media networking fact sheet. *Internet & Tech*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/

Pinch, T. J., & Bijker, W. E. (1987). The social construction of facts and artifacts: Or how the sociology of science and the sociology of technology might benefit each other. In W. E. Bijker, T. P. Hughes, & T. Pinch (Eds.), *The social construction of technological systems: New directions in the sociology and history of technology* (pp. 17–50). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Rayburn, J. D. (1996). Uses and gratifications. In M. B. Salwen & D. W. Stacks (Eds.), *An integrated approach to communication theory and research* (pp. 97–119). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Reddit. (2014, September). reddiquette. *reddit*. Retrieved from http://www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette

Rubin, A. M. (1994). Media uses and effects: A uses-and-gratifications perspective. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 417–436). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication & Society*, *3*, 3–37. doi:10.1207/S15327825MCS0301_02

Shirky, C. (2010). *Cognitive surplus: How technology makes consumers into collaborators*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Smock, A. D., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., & Wohn, D. Y. (2011). Facebook as a toolkit: A uses and gratification approach to unbundling feature use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *27*, 2322–2329. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.07.011

Statista. (2014). Global social networks ranked by number of users 2014. *Social Media & User-Generated Contet*. Retrieved from http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

Sundar, S. S., & Limperos, A. M. (2013). Uses and grats 2.0: New gratifications for new media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *57*, 504–525. doi:10.1080/08838151.2013.845827

Tam, D. (2012, August 22). Facebook processes more than 500 TB of data daily. *CNET*. Retrieved from http://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-processes-more-than-500-tb-of-data-daily/

Twitter. (2014). Glossary. *Support*. Retrieved from https://support.twitter.com/groups/50-welcome-to-twitter/topics/204-the-basics/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary#f

Walther, J. B., Tong, S. T., DeAndrea, D., Carr, C. T., & Van Der Heide, B. (2011). A juxtaposition of social influences: Web 2.0 and the interaction of mass, interpersonal, and peer sources online. In Z. Birchmeier, B. Dietz-Uhler, & G. Stasser (Eds.), *Strategic uses of social technology: An interactive perspective of social psychology* (pp. 172–194). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wang, V., Tucker, J. V., & Rihll, T. E. (2011). On phatic technologies for creating and maintaining human relationships. *Technology in Society*, *33*, 44–51. doi:10.1016/j.techsoc.2011.03.017

Wohn, D. Y., & Lee, Y-H. (2013). Players of Facebook games and how they play. *Entertainment Computing*, *4*, 171–178.

Wright, K. B. (2002). Social support within an on-line cancer community: An assessment of emotional support, perceptions of advantages and disadvantages, and motives for using the community from a communication perspective. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *30*, 195–209.

Yoo, C. Y. (2011). Modeling audience interactivity as the gratification-seeking process in online newspapers. *Communication Theory*, *21*, 67–89. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01376.x