

Experiencing the Digital News: The multiple dimensions of users' experience in news media use

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Abstract. The term media experience is seldom defined explicitly by communication and media scholars. Most often, it refers to media use and the feeling (such as enjoyment) resulted from the use. To fill this void, the present study turns to presence studies which espouse the idea of being there in mediated environment. As online news use involves a kind of mediated experience, this study adopts the existing measure of presence to determine the multiple dimensions of online news experience. A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used to establish the dimensions of the experience in this exploratory study. Four dimensions were extracted from the analysis: para-social interaction, transportation, absorption and social realism. The study found that online news users were experiencing beyond ordinary description; they interacted with the news, absorbed in the narrative world, and to certain extent felt that they were being transported into such world and also experienced the realism that the news stories tend to convey. Implications for understanding the experience in news media use from presence perspective are discussed.

1 Introduction

The adoption of the Internet as a mainstream news medium has become a global phenomenon. Since early 2000, the pattern of online news consumption across the globe has shown a strong growth of online news consumption especially in communities that have high Internet penetration and the developed segments of Asia-Pacific region [1]. Earlier studies indicate that the demographic characteristics of those who use the Internet regularly as a source of news have both increased and broadened [2] and a more recent report suggests the trend of using Facebook and twitter for news is on the rise [3]. The trend also suggests that the Internet has become the first choice for news and information among young people [4]. What leads towards this adoption is often linked to the attractive attributes of the Internet as the source of news. News research, however, seems to pay less attention to the experience of news use in online environment. Thus, examining the experience, and its possible dimensions, is central to the current study.

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2 Literature Review

News researchers have attempted to understand the reasons for online news adoption. Examining online news use in Hong Kong, Chan and Fang [5] factor-analyzed 10 online news features and found that convenience, interactivity and multimedia were the key factors of adoption. Nguyen [6] found that an increase in online news attributes – in terms of 24/7 updates, customized news and no cost – predicts newspaper displacement. The attribute of convenience was found to be a strong predictor of the credibility of online news among politically interested news users [7]. Meanwhile, other study [8] found website usability and website attractiveness determined the selection of a particular news website over the other.

These studies shared one common theme; they examined the relationships between online news attributes and online news adoption within the innovation-diffusion framework. The attributes, to a certain extent, determine users' experience with the media. Yet, the two constructs are not identical. In consumer marketing research, for example, scholars define product attribute as users' perception of the product, not objective reality, which determine how it will be evaluated and purchased [9] while, product experience is defined as consumers' knowledge about and familiarity with a product or product category [10]. What constitutes attribute and experience in these studies signifies two different meanings.

The term 'experience' itself is loaded with various meanings. Most often, it refers to the real life, not the ideal or imaginary. It is also common to define experience as the knowledge or skill that results from experience. Another definition focuses on one's consciousness; "the conscious events that make up an individual life"[11]. This term, however, is seldom found in communication and media research. A closer examination of the studies in this field revealed that users' experience with media has been measured using various terms and in many ways; media use habit [12], media use [13] and media enjoyment [14]. These studies indicate that the frequency or pattern of media usage and the feelings resulted from the usage have been equated to the experience with the media.

It is also important to note that uses and gratifications approach has been applied to understand the experience of online news consumption [e.g.15]. Some studies [e.g.16, 17] have also examined different contexts, particularly online versus print environments, to demonstrate the effects of medium on news use. Notwithstanding, many studies especially in the field of computer sciences and cognitive psychology have longed been examining the experience of 'presence' which has been described as a sense of "being there" in a mediated environment. There was a growing interest among researchers [e.g.: 18, 19] to examine presence in order to understand the extent to which users find the virtual environment more engaging than the physical world. It is about the experiencing the "real" through media use.

Attempts have been made to conceptualize the concept of presence and provide theoretical evidence to establish its dimensions. Studies have established multiple dimensions of presence which include (a) social richness, (b) realism (c) immersion, (d) transportation, (e) social actor within the medium and (f) medium as social actor [20]. These dimensions have been further developed by Lee [21] who suggests (a) subjective or objective social richness; (b) perceptual or social realism; (c) transportation of self, place or other selves; (d) perceptual or psychological immersion; (e) social interaction with an entity within a medium and (f) social interaction with a medium itself as dimensions of presence. The concept of presence and its multiple dimensions demonstrate the experience of using a medium and how users perceive such experience.

Although presence is often examined in the immersive environment of virtual reality, it has also been tested in the context of different media. Previous studies have examined presence experience in video games [22] films [23] and even books [24]. Hence, the current study finds the logical appeal to adopt the concept of presence in explaining the experience of “being there” felt by audiences when they read a news story in an online environment. Such an experience refers to a direct relationship between the readers and the news story. In other words, readers feel that they are directly connected to the content and the story in such a way that they experience the shock, horror or pleasure conveyed by the news. Attempts to examine the experience of media use using this approach is almost non-existent. To fill the gap, this study is designed to explore dimensions of users’ experience in online news consumption by using the measure of presence adopted from past research.

3 Methodology

A post-model experiment, exposing participants to an online newspaper, was conducted at one of the public universities in Malaysia. The study sample was a group of 147 undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in the experiment. On the day of the experiment, participants were directed to computer laboratories to read *Berita Harian* online without any time restriction imposed on them. After completing the reading task, they were asked to fill in a closed-ended questionnaire measuring their experience of reading the news during the exposure. The questionnaire consists of questions on presence dimensions, adopted from existing measures found in the literature, of which some of them were modified to suit the context of online news environment. All questions were written in both English and Bahasa Malaysia in one form (i.e: bi-lingual questionnaire). Principal component analysis (PCA) was used to establish the multiple dimension of users’ experience in online news environment.

4 Results

Principal Component Analysis (PCA), with a varimax rotation, was used to determine the dimensions of online news experience. The analysis showed 10 components that fulfil Kaiser’s criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Considering the study is concerned with the newly constructed scale for presence experience in the context of online news environment, factor loadings greater than 0.40 with secondary loadings above 0.20 difference were accepted. Scree plot analysis shows a break in the slope of eigenvalues after the fourth factor and hence the number of the dimensions were reduced to 4 factors. Some items were removed as they were conceptually inconsistent with the other items in the same factors. After elimination of these items, the final analysis produced 4 factors to represent presence experience in online news use. Table 1 presents the results of this analysis.

Table 1. Factor loadings using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation

Factors	Indicators	1	2	3	4
Para-social interaction	Showing non-verbal expressions to expressions/statements of people in news	.74			
	Reacting emotionally to expressions/statements of people in news	.69			

	Having the tendency to make verbal expressions to expressions of people in the news	.69			
	Ability to imagine the non-verbal expressions of people in news	.66			
	Ability to understood exactly what the people were going through emotionally	.63			
Transporta-tion	Ability to feel as if the self is at the location where the event occurred		.77		
	Being transported to the place where event occurred		.76		
	Picturing the self at the scene of news event		.74		
	Ability to feel that the events in the news is happening before the self		.73		
	Picturing the event as it is taking place		.70		
	Ability to feel as if the event was closer to the self than the real world		.64		
Absorption	Being pulled into the news story			.76	
	Ability to keep the mind focused on the news			.75	
	Ability to focus on the news; not thinking about other things			.72	
	Having the mind connected to the news; not wandering			.66	
	Being immersed into the news; not dragging			.64	
Social realism	Thinking that the events/incidents in the news could occur in real life				.83
	Believing that the events/incidents is a real life situation				.71
	Thinking that the news story sounds real				.69
	Believing that the events/incidents could occur to the self				.53
	Thinking that the news looks real				.43

Consequently, the current study interpreted the four factors accordingly. The first factor consisted of five items that reflect users' verbal and non-verbal engagement with the news. It was then labelled 'para-social interaction'. This factor explained 25.95% of variance in the experience of presence in online news use. The second factor that emerged from the analysis consisted of six items with 11.52% of variance explained. The factor refers to a sense of being transported to the location of the news event. Hence the second factor was labelled 'transportation'. The third factor which comprised of five items, was labelled the 'absorption' as the indicators suggest the extent to which users immerse themselves in the narrative world. All five items under this factor were reversed coded from distraction items to absorption items, and the revised statements representing the feeling of being absorbed in the news narrative were included in Table 2. This factor explained 7.65% of variance in the experience of online news use. Finally the last factor that emerged in the study is 'social

realism', which explained 5.73% of variance and comprised of five items. Social realism denotes the extent to which users feel that the news is real. The measure of all factors met the requirement of a reliable index as Cronbach alpha values for each factor was greater than 0.7.

5 Discussions

The aim of the current study is to understand media experience from different perspective. Using the existing measure of presence, this study explores how online users experience the news. The exploration leads to the discovery of four factors; para-social interaction, transportation, absorption and social realism, that represent the experience of presence in news consumption.

Firstly, this study found para-social interaction contributes the most in explaining the experience of news use. This concept is related to the fifth dimension, presence as social actor within the medium, as proposed by Lombard and Ditton [25]. This dimension involves responding to social cues presented by a social actor within a medium. This study found that the para-social interaction, in the context of online news use, occurs when users involves in verbal and no-verbal expressions to the news stories that they read. The expressions could be in the form of emotional reaction to the stories and empathy towards the people in the news.

The second dimension is the sense of being transported to the news world. Lee [21] coins this dimension as transportation of self, place and other places which suggest two conditions; first is when users feel as if they were brought to a different time or place where the event occurred and second is when the objects or people from other places were brought to them through media use. In the context of online news use, users feel as though they are been transported to the news world, witnessing the events at the location where the events occurred. The finding could be implied by connecting this experience with the availability of multimedia contents in online news such as videos, picture galleries and interactive images. These features allow users to experience the transportation of self and place in online news media environment.

Absorption, the third dimension, is a concept closely related to transportation. It involves a sense of transitioning from the actual world to the narrative world [26]. The core to absorption is the experience with the narrative such as understanding and paying attention to it. In the context of online news use, this experience denotes the extent that users can focus and attentive to the news stories. Such an experience can also lead to the sense of being immersed in the news narratives.

Last but not least, social realism is the fourth factor found in the current study. It refers to a sensation of reality resulted from the real representations of objects, events or people produced by the medium [20]. The fact that news construct reality is often debated by journalism scholars. According to Lau [27], construction of reality happens when the reality is described in news and taken to be true by the public. The current study supports this notion as the finding suggest users find the news to be real and could affect their lives.

In conclusion, the current study provides a novel approach in understanding users' experience with the news and news media. This study contributes to the re-conceptualization of media experience as a multidimensional construct in media studies. On the practical side, uncovering users' experience in para-social interaction, transportation, absorption and social realism in online news consumption can help media practitioners to develop effective journalistic strategies to enhance news sites stickiness. Measurement validation for these dimensions is recommended for future research.

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