



Lurking as literacy practice: A uses and gratifications study in neighborhood Facebook groups

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Abstract

This study explores lurking as a literacy practice and poses two questions: In what ways do so-called Facebook lurkers use neighborhood groups to engage in literacy practices? What gratifications are sought when individuals choose to lurk and engage in these literacy practices in Facebook neighborhood groups? A community mapping of the literacy practices of NYC suburban neighborhood Facebook groups was conducted by 203 participants, and 18 of those participants were interviewed. Through lurking, participants sought to gratify desires to (1) understand a divergent point of view, (2) verify information, (3) suppress the spread of information, (4) pivot to offline social action, (5) advance professionally, and (6) maintain quality of community life. The study also introduces the concepts of receptive reading, participatory restraint, and protective curation as ways of reading that individuals engage in while gratifying these desires.

Keywords

Facebook groups, literacy, lurking, participatory restraint, protective curation, receptive reading

Introduction

Comparing the Internet lurker to Baudelaire's flâneur, Daub (2020) writes that the aimless wandering we experience on the Internet is an apt description of our collective pandemic experience where "at certain points and in certain situations, being a lurker is a sane, ethical, thoughtful response to a moment of crisis" (para 6). Once

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thought to be an act of “selfish free riders” who take, but contribute nothing, to an online discussion (Kollock and Smith, 1996), contemporary research on lurking has demonstrated that lurking is a normal, active, and participatory online behavior (Edelmann et al., 2017; Honeychurch et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2014). Dennen (2008) explains that although “‘lurk’ carries negative connotations, it is perfectly reasonable to think that someone may wish to observe others’ communication and interactions with a positive intent” (p. 1624). There have been attempts to rename lurkers as “legitimate peripheral participants” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or “non public participants” (Nonnecke, 2000), but neither of these terms has taken a predominant place within academic literature. In the book *Lurking*, McNeil (2020) describes the Internet lurker as an identity we all assume from time to time as we seek to learn. Lurkers can account for almost 90% of participants in an online group (Antin and Cheshire, 2010; Katz, 1998; Muller, 2012; Nonnecke et al., 2004). Definitions of lurking range from no posting (Neelan and Fetter, 2010) to minimal posting (Ridings et al., 2006) and in the case of this study is defined as the choice to refrain from engaging in front-facing publicity metrics (likes, comments, and shares). Lurking can also be conceptualized as a way of reading that has emerged from the invention of computing technologies.

Literacy practices

Nonnecke et al. (2004) found that “just reading/browsing” is the primary reason why individuals choose to lurk. Reading, however, is never a neutral act (Street, 2003). There has been tremendous research on the deleterious effects of the algorithmic spread of misinformation (Caplan et al., 2018; Phillips, 2018) and the ways in which social media users both actively and passively consume this content, particularly in Facebook groups (Jankowicz, 2020). In the Stanford History Education Group study, Wineburg and McGrew (2019) sampled 45 Internet users ranging from 10 PhD historians, 10 professional fact-checkers, and 25 Stanford undergraduate students to observe the strategies used to evaluate online information. Wineburg and McGrew (2019) posit the term lateral reading to describe the way fact-checkers will quickly leave an article and then open up multiple tabs in their browser to verify the information. During lateral reading, the goal is to avoid reading vertically, a term they use to describe reading an entire article from top to bottom without leaving the website to search for additional information. Lateral readers briefly scan the original article for information and then browse around six other sites to verify the information they have encountered. The goal of lateral reading is to first identify the biases, motivations, and intentions of the author or institution publishing the content to see if it is reliable. Lateral reading helps a reader identify misinformation. Caulfield (2019) developed the SIFT method to offer concrete approaches to lateral reading and it has since become a widely adopted media literacy education strategy for minimizing the amplification of misinformation. In the SIFT method, a reader will (1) S: Stop, (2) I: Investigate the Source, (3) F: Find better coverage, and (4) T: Trace claims, quotes, and media to their original content. In this strategy, the most important step is the first one, stopping and resisting the use of publicity metrics. Ellison et al. (2020) introduce the concept of the non-click, the decision

an individual makes whether or not to click on a publicity metric (like, share, comment). In their study of the behaviors of clickers and lurkers, Ellison et al. (2020) use eye-tracking cameras, surveys, and interviews of 45 participant Facebook users to determine that “sometimes non-clicking can be an intentional act resulting from conscious and thoughtful engagement.” The interview data showed that there were three audience-related concerns that motivated non-clicks: (1) Do I want this person to see this click? (2) Do I want their/my/our networks to see this click? (3) Do I want the platform to see this click?

Therefore lurking as literacy practice must also be understood within the context of situated literacies. Reading is transactional and a reader’s history, geography, culture, and the moment in time that they encounter the text influence the depth to which they read and with what purpose (Rosenblatt, 1994). Barton and Hamilton’s (2000) concept of socially situated literacy practices explains that literacy practices are not merely observable behaviors; they include unobservable elements, such as beliefs, inclinations, feelings, and social relationships. Popovac and Fullwood (2019) argue that lurking depends on a range of situational factors within a group. Neighborhood groups, Facebook groups created for a specific geographic area where the intended membership is primarily composed of people who live within that area, are an important site of analysis because group membership often contains people who are connected virtually and geographically offline. One way to examine these literacy practices is through community mapping. Community mapping (sometimes referred to as asset mapping) is both a process and a product where a community collectively and informally self-identifies data to map assets, values, and/or beliefs (Keller, 2014). Community mapping “tells the story of a neighborhood” (Jackson and Bryson, 2018) and has been used by Dunsmore et al. (2013) as an effective way to identify literacy practices in neighborhood and school settings. Examining an individual’s use of literacy practices while lurking in neighborhood Facebook groups and the gratifications sought from those practices offers insight into the way individuals understand and navigate the ideological—raced and classed, for example—power dynamics within their online and offline community.

Uses and gratifications

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explores ways that people are psychologically motivated to engage with media to obtain various gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). According to Rubin (1994), UGT assumes an individual’s “communication behavior, including media selection and use, is goal-directed, purposive, and motivated” (p. 420). An axiomatic theory, UGT can be applied to all forms of emerging media, including social media (Lue and Remue, 2014), and has been adopted widely in the analysis of Facebook usage and significance (Dhir et al., 2017; Malik et al., 2015). Social media studies utilizing UGT have consistently identified entertainment, information-seeking, and socialization as primary needs that users seek to gratify (Cheung and Lee, 2009; Gülnar et al., 2010; Park et al., 2009; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010). In their analysis of the psychology of lurking, Popovac and Fullwood (2019) posit that lurkers are goal-directed in their behavior, which supports the use of studying their behavior through a

UGT approach. Nonnecke and Preece (2001) explain that lurkers' needs are gratified without posting, and initially they found that the most cited reason for lurking was anonymity, privacy, and safety. In a later replication of this study, where participants were surveyed with greater specificity, Nonnecke et al. (2004) found that 53.9% of participants agreed that "just reading/browsing" was the primary reason why individuals choose to lurk while 15.1% of participants agreed that wanting to remain anonymous was their reason for lurking.

Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) explain that there has been a long history of combining UGT with other methods. Asghar (2015) contends that exclusive use of UGT is a limited way of understanding how individuals use Facebook for information-seeking, particularly for lurkers whose needs are gratified by obtaining information rather than socializing. Menon and Meghana (2021) effectively combined UGT and Constant Comparative methodological approaches to unpack the interviews of Indian teachers using Facebook to determine four gratifications: Social interaction, Information-seeking, Affection seeking, and Escape. Although Constant comparative analysis (CCA) originated from Glaser and Strauss (1967) treatise on Grounded Theory (GT), CCA allows for the creation of a set of themes that can be effectively used outside of a GT framework (Fram, 2013; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Charmaz 2001; Grove 1988).

Research questions

RQ1: In what ways do so-called Facebook lurkers use neighborhood groups to engage in literacy practices?

RQ2: What gratifications are sought when individuals choose to lurk and engage in these literacy practices in Facebook neighborhood groups?

Methods

This two-part qualitative study began with a community mapping of self-reported literacy practices used by individuals lurking in NYC suburban neighborhood Facebook Groups. After the community mapping was completed, respondents had the option to participate in a series of one to two follow-up interviews about the gratifications sought from lurking while engaging in these literacy practices. The research occurred from May 2020 to October 2020.

Participants

Participants for this inquiry were solicited from 15 neighborhood Facebook Groups; the researcher was a member of each group prior to the start of the study. The sum membership of all 15 groups was 102,793 at the time the study commenced. The community mapping generated 203 participants from both large NYC suburban regional groups and three local communities, which have been pseudonymized: Ocean Ridge, Whitman Circle, and Hollow Junction. Ocean Ridge is a mostly White affluent community. Whitman Circle is a mostly White middle-class community. Hollow Junction is a mostly

Black middle-class community. Of the 203 community mapping participants, 18 participants from Whitman Circle and Ocean Ridge agreed to be interviewed and ranged in age from 30 to 70.

Participants in both the community mapping and the interview portion of the study were made aware that they were contributing to dissertation research about online reading practices by Hofstra University. For the community mapping, participants understood that their responses were anonymous and their identity could not be verified by either the researcher or other members of the Facebook group participating in or viewing the community map.

The term “lurking” was not included in the recruitment language for the community mapping portion of the study, but it was included in the recruitment language for interviews. Lurking can carry negative and predatory connotations and these associations would likely make it difficult to initially recruit participants. In a study on best practices for recruiting hidden populations via social media for qualitative research, Sikkens et al. (2016) suggest researchers avoid polarizing terms in their initial call for participants. After participants have contacted the researcher about the study, the researcher can fully explain the purpose and contextualize any potentially polarizing language. This is the way that Sikkens et al. (2016) were able to recruit and gain consent to study teenagers with extremist political views. Utilizing the approach of Sikkens et al. (2016), prospective interview participants were informed that the study sought to gather information about lurking in neighborhood Facebook groups when they responded to the call for participants. All interview participants read and signed a Hofstra University institutional review board (IRB) consent form and understood that they were participating in a study about lurking when they agreed to be interviewed.

Consent of the entire Facebook group or the moderator on behalf of the group was not attempted because attempting to gain consent from an entire group can inadvertently affect the participation practices of users and may encourage an increased degree of lurking. The AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) guidelines for ethical research assert that where it is necessary to protect the safety of participants, consent of an entire group is not mandatory (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Markham (2013), citing the work of Eva Svedmark, explains that announcing your role as a researcher may also alter the performance of group members.

Community mapping

Community mapping (sometimes referred to as asset mapping) is both a process and a product where a community collectively and informally self-identifies data to map assets, values, and/or beliefs (Keller, 2014). Community mapping “tells the story of a neighborhood” (Jackson and Bryson, 2018) and has been used as an effective way to identify literacy practices in school settings (Dunsmore et al., 2013). In Dunsmore et al. (2003) researchers collaborated with elementary school teachers, students, and parents to identify the ways that students used literacy practices in their neighborhood and home life. Community mapping data collection requests utilizing Padlet were posted to one to two neighborhood Facebook groups per week beginning in May 2020. Padlet is a social curation web application that allows a user to create a virtual whiteboard where others

can contribute via virtual sticky notes. Participants could anonymously identify the literacy practices they engaged in while lurking by both favoriting existing practices and adding new practices. Anonymous commenting was enabled for several reasons: (1) it lowers the barrier to participation because anonymous participants are not required to create an account, thus enabling one-click participation; (2) Padlet allows for only one favorite per sticky note, even from anonymous participants, thus avoiding the confounding issue of one participant favoriting a single sticky note multiple times; and (3) it protects the privacy of participants from both the researcher and the group as a whole, which might encourage lurkers to participate. By favoriting a sticky note, participants self-reported that they had used this literacy practice at least once while being a member of the group.

The initial literacy practices included on the Padlet were derived from studies of previous interviews of lurker habits. A survey developed by Nonnecke and Preece (2003) found that lurkers provide value because lurkers (1) work at knowing the group, (2) try not to add to the chaos, (3) extend the group, (4) side post, and (5) make a commitment. In the description of these values, lurkers reported that they engaged in conversations, gathered information, and posted what they learned in other venues. The initial list of literacy practices created for this study sought to discover specific ways that lurkers used the group for literacy practices to converse, gather information, and post (or apply) what they learned in other places (both on and offline). The initial list of literacy practices on the Padlet was as follows:

- Researched more information about a topic by visiting a search engine, like Google;
- Had a face-to-face conversation with a friend or family member about something that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Screenshot a post;
- Had a text message conversation with a friend or family member about something that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Supported a local business/service-provider mentioned in this group;
- Took social or political action (signed a petition, wrote to an elected official, attended a community meeting, donated to a cause) about something you learned about in the group;
- Attended an event that you read/learned about in a group conversation;
- Watched a TV show that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Watched a movie that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Bought a book about something that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Borrowed a book from the library about something that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Listened to a song about something that was mentioned in a group conversation;
- Used a social media platform, other than Facebook, to post about something you read about in a Facebook group. For example: You read/found a recipe in a Facebook group and then you made the recipe and shared a picture of the dish on your Instagram feed without ever liking, sharing, or commenting about the meal on Facebook.

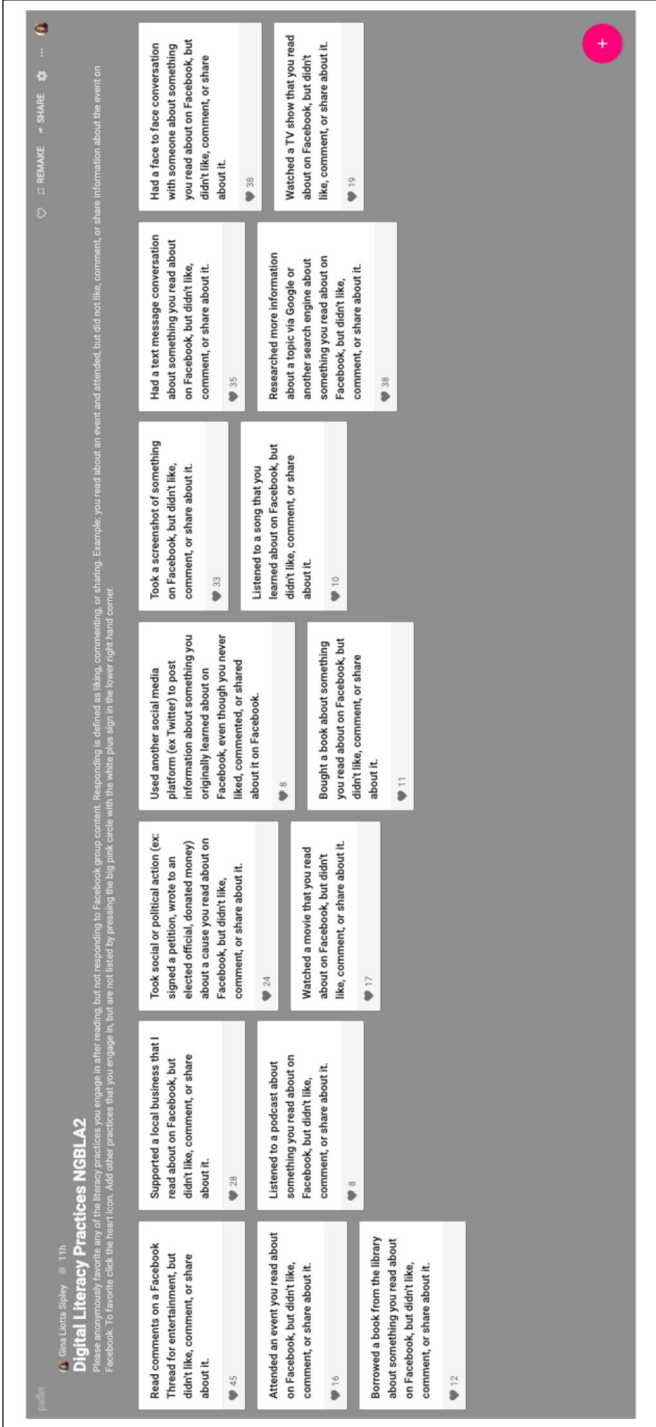


Figure 1. Neighborhood group B local area 2 Padlet.

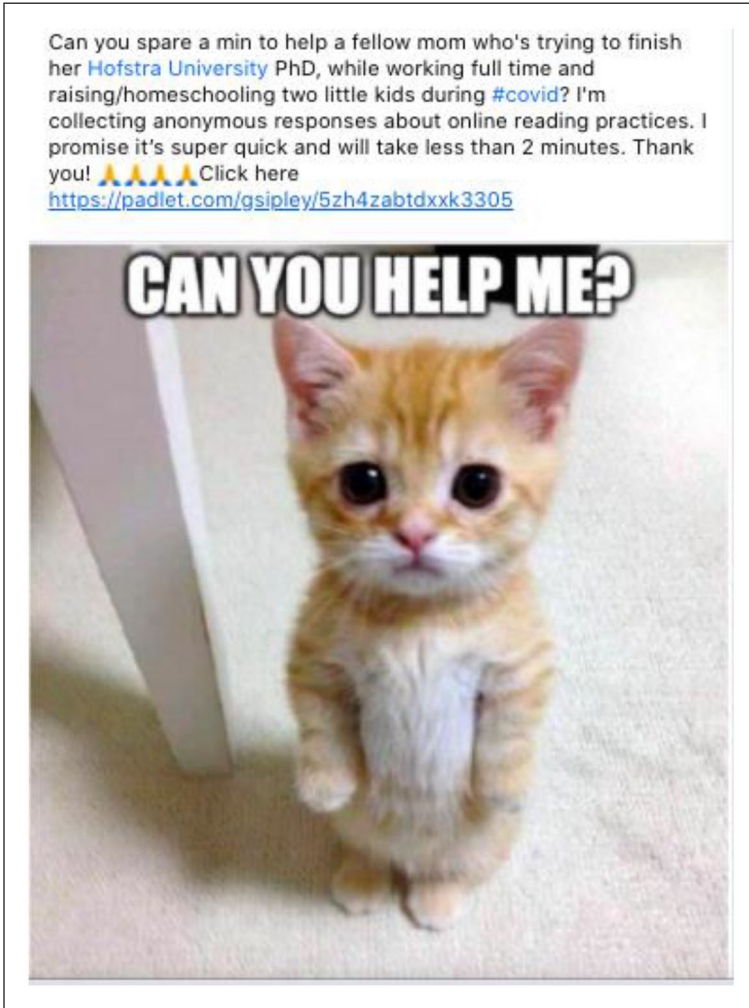


Figure 2. Meme: *Can you help me?* with Facebook group post.

Participants had been given the option to add literacy practices to the Padlet, but none of the participants in any of the 15 neighborhood groups did so.

Interviews

After allowing the initial community mapping data post to circulate for 1 week, a second Facebook post was made to each of the 15 groups with a visualization of the community mapping results and a request to solicit interviews. This second post included a Google form where prospective participants could submit their contact information to learn more about the project and receive an IRB consent form. Meanwhile, the researcher continued

the process of gathering community mapping data for 1 to 2 neighborhood groups each week and then followed up with these groups to solicit interviews. Additional literacy practices were uncovered during the interview stage and were added to future Padlets. Data saturation was determined by examining previous studies on interview data saturation and sample size. For studies that do not involve cross-cultural comparisons, between 6 and 20 interviews has been found to be a sufficient sample (Guest et al., 2020). The first 5 to 6 interviews provide the majority of the new information and little new information is found as the sample approaches 20 or more participants (Morgan et al., 2002; Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006; Namey et al., 2016).

Eighteen participants agreed to be interviewed. The interviews sought to understand a participant's overall Facebook behavior and the choices they made about when to lurk and when to engage in publicity metrics. It was an opportunity to ask explicit questions about the initial literacy practices posted to Padlet (e.g. Can you think of a time when you screenshot a group post, but did not comment, like, or share about the post in the group? Why in this instance did you choose not to comment, like, or share?). As new lurker literacy practices emerged in conversation with participants, they were added to future Padlets. The additional practices added were the following:

- Read for entertainment;
- Read to understand a different point of view;
- Read for investment opportunities;
- Read for hyperlocal news.

Results

The sum of all the literacy practices used by participants can be found in Table 1. Search engine research and read for entertainment were the most popular literacy practices used by participants.

Using constant comparative analysis, the data from the interviews was collected and coded. The data shows that through lurking, participants sought to gratify desires to (1) understand a divergent point of view, (2) verify information, (3) suppress the spread of information, (4) pivot to offline social action, (5) advance professionally, and (6) maintain quality of community life. Table 2 outlines three kinds of reading, identified as lurker literacies, that occurred while participants sought to gratify these desires. The lurker literacies are (1) receptive reading, (2) participatory restraint, and (3) protective curation.

Receptive reading

Receptive reading occurs when an individual lurks to gratify the desire to understand a divergent point of view and to verify information (Lim et al., 2021; Siple, 2020). Participants described engaging in receptive reading to better understand community opinions and verify information about Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, vaccines, and the 2020 US presidential election.

The Netflix docu-drama movie, *The Social Dilemma*, was cited by several participants as making them more conscious of the bias in their newsfeed and igniting a desire

Table 1. Use of literacy practices while lurking.

Initial practices	Favorites
Search engine research	173
Face-to-face conversation	159
Screenshot posts	159
Text message conversation	157
Support local business	142
Take social action	123
Attend event	86
Watch TV show	82
Watch movie	77
Buy book	54
Borrow library book	44
Listen to song	36
Listen to podcast	30
Post to other social networking site	24
Additional practices	Favorites
Read for entertainment	172
Understand a different point of view	61
Read for investment opportunities	32
Read for hyperlocal news	14

Table 2. Gratifications sought while lurking.

Lurker literacies	Themes
Receptive reading	Understand a divergent point of view Verify information
Participatory restraint	Control the spread of information Pivot to offline social action
Protective curation	Advance career Maintain quality of community life

to read beyond their feed. This includes reading the perspectives of people with different political opinions, racial backgrounds, and socioeconomic status. Shannon of Ocean Ridge described the film's influence by saying,

Facebook is made so you see many opinions that are the same as yours and you start kind of taking that as the majority. [. . .] I started to try and read other people's opinions, so I could be flexible in my thinking.

Kristen of Ocean Ridge, a Democrat, expressed a similar sentiment about reading the posts of a Republican neighbor who also attended the same high school as Kristen. She said,

He's allowed to be Republican. It's not like we can all be so black and white about all this. I like seeing his responses to stuff in particular because I like the way he disagrees. [. . .] He just respectfully disagrees [. . .] and is able to hold a rational discussion. And these days, especially with the friends that I know, not really close friends, but people that I went to high school with, they're just all watching the same channel and they have the same buzzwords. [. . .] It's really just hard to have a conversation with them. So in terms of learning new things I guess I value his opinions and where they're coming from.

Logan of Whitman Circle makes the important distinction that the degree of opposition is often an important factor when deciding whether or not to engage in receptive reading. He explains,

There are plenty of times you read through what people are saying with diametrically opposed political views to your own to at least understand where other folks in the spectrum are coming from. And even more importantly, sometimes you read stuff from people that are not diametrically opposed to you, but have at least enough of a markedly different point of view, that it's valuable to see people from a broad spectrum, not just the two polar opposites.

To apply what Logan has said to Kristen's point: both Kristen and her conservative high school friend were not Trump supporters. They belonged to two different political parties but shared their disinterest in re-electing Trump. Therefore, part of what interested her in receptive reading is that she shared some common ground and wanted to better understand the aspects of conservative political opinion where they differed.

In regard to Black Lives Matter, Claudia of Ocean Ridge, who identifies as a White liberal, explains a similar desire to better understand the movement. She says,

I don't know if necessarily my opinion has shifted as much as I've been educated by things that I didn't know. Like, whether it be someone sharing their particular experiences [. . .] or sharing maybe an article or a data point that I wasn't aware of that has maybe shifted my opinion [. . .]. For example, maybe systemic racism wasn't something I was so aware of and now seeing people's comments on these data points. [. . .] It makes you feel more strongly.

Mallory from Whitman Circle expressed a similar sentiment. She did not specify her registered political position, but she is a member of a multigenerational family of law enforcement officers and a gun owner who firmly supports Second Amendment Rights. She states that she has learned a lot about systemic racism and it is something she was not as informed about. In general, she feels that political discussions should occur face-to-face to avoid "keyboard warriors," people who post inflammatory things they would not say publicly. While she scrolls past derogatory comments from both sides, she was open to learning about systemic racism from posts that were written in a way to "empathize or sympathize with somebody else's perspective."

Sam of Whitman Circle simultaneously engages in lateral reading and receptive reading to verify the information. Sam doesn't identify as Republican or Democrat, but he reads posts from users on both sides and tries to read news from CNN and Fox to get a broader sense of a story. When he encounters a headline that disturbs him, he researches it on both media outlets to understand the full context. When a friend texted him a

screenshot of a post about “disgusting animals poisoning NYC police officers,” he logged on to the neighborhood Facebook group. The post described Black Lives Matter supporters putting Clorox in the milkshakes of NYC Police Officers at a Shake Shack. When Sam researched the story he learned that this incident was deemed an accident with the cleaning products in the milkshake machine and it was not a premeditated action, nor was anyone affiliated with Black Lives Matter involved.

Receptive reading about COVID-19 made Anne of Whitman Circle more aware of her socioeconomic privilege. When New York state indoor dining reopened, Anne, of Whitman Circle, went to a restaurant and when served, took off her mask to eat. She saw a friend and got up from her table to talk. The waitress stopped Anne because she was not wearing a mask and explained that she had to stay at her own table. Anne was compliant, but verbally expressed her dissatisfaction with what she felt was a ridiculous policy. The next day she read a post on the Whitman Circle Facebook group by a restaurant worker begging patrons to understand how difficult it is to work in the restaurant industry under COVID-19 guidelines. The post urged customers not to take their anger out on low-wage employees who work under strict COVID-19 protocols with little job security. Anne did not engage with publicity metrics on the post but felt that it was speaking to her about the way she had behaved in the restaurant. She talked about the post with her friends and her children, pledging to be more empathetic and to tip better the next time she went to a restaurant.

Participatory restraint

Participatory restraint occurs when an individual lurks to gratify the desire to suppress the spread of information and/or to pivot to offline action (Lim et al., 2021; Siple, 2020). These efforts are sometimes taken individually and are sometimes collectively decided by group members using non-Facebook communication to intentionally not share their dissent via Facebook publicity metrics.

In one example of suppression, Claudia describes a post on an Ocean Ridge group where community members were questioning the size of the school budget. A handful of community members were angered by the parent-led fundraising effort for COVID-19 mitigation supplies. In their opinion, these supplies should have been funded by the highly priced school taxes. Some group members began to fight with the original poster and commenters to demonstrate the necessity of the supplies. The purpose of these arguments was to persuade readers to see the value in contributing to the fundraiser. As the number of people involved in the discussion grows so do the number of people reading it. While Claudia is often happy to share her opinion and try to reason with others, she decided to lurk and not engage in publicity metrics. By not engaging with the post, her resistance was part of an effort to minimize algorithmic attention. Virtual learning was an overwhelming experience for Claudia. Keeping the schools safely open was her top priority. For this reason, she felt that the stakes were too high on this particular post. She did not want to offer free advertising to those with views similar to that of the original poster who were not yet aware of the fundraising project. She notes that in offline conversation with other friends, they, too, had chosen to refrain from publicity metrics for the same reason.

In a second example of suppression, Elizabeth of Ocean Ridge is a proud Trump supporter and, at the time of the interview, hopes that he will be re-elected in 2020. However, not all of her offline friends share her opinion. She encountered a post in an Ocean Ridge Facebook Group that listed all of the things that Trump achieved during his tenure. Despite her commitment to his campaign, she was skeptical that all of the things listed were true. She decided to not immediately use publicity metrics for two reasons: (1) if some of the information turned out to be false, spreading the information could sour Trump's reputation for undecided voters; (2) even if the information is true, registered Democrats and Independents are not likely to change their opinion by reading the post. This would be the kind of post where people would argue and become further entrenched in their beliefs. She purposefully did not engage in publicity metrics to suppress the spread of the post.

Where Elizabeth did not dissent the original post, she did dissent the commenting thread where there was vociferous bickering and did not want to expand the reach of the debate. Elizabeth decided to fact-check all of the items on the post and was pleased that they appeared to be true. She printed three copies of the post and called two friends, one who was a Democrat and one who was an Independent, to invite them over for a socially distanced meetup in her backyard. During their visit, Elizabeth passed out a copy of the post for each friend to read. Elizabeth and her friends engaged in a discussion of Trump's accomplishments. The friends did not agree that all items were necessarily celebratory accomplishments, but they did concede that some things like increased funding for the arts were important.¹ Elizabeth is not certain how both of her friends will vote in the 2020 Presidential election, but having this kind of discussion offline, face to face, was a way to sustain their friendship and local community ties. It also limited the spread of the misinformation that occurred among those bickering in the commenting section.

Participants sought to suppress racist communication within the group. Kristen and Shannon of Ocean Ridge state that the neighborhood group is where they first learned about a series of attempted assaults of a possible sexual nature. Initially, the incidents were discussed in the Facebook group and it took several days for the local media to publish the story. In the interim, members shared information on the specific streets and times of day when the attempts occurred. The assailant's clothes were described but no other identifying details. Shannon was hesitant to comment on these posts although she wanted more information. Pressing for more information might reveal the race of the assailant, and even though she was nervous, she did not want to inadvertently contribute to a post that might amplify a response of racial profiling among community members.

Claudia, Kristen, and Shannon belong to three separate groups of friends where each group collectively engaged in participatory restraint. These three disparate circles of friends were actively involved in group texts where they discussed strategies to minimize the amplification of antisemitic content in an Ocean Ridge group. They described the moderator of the group as someone who did not allow dissenting opinions and would kick people out who questioned the posts. For a while, Claudia, Shannon, and Kristen stayed in the group to lurk because they thought that it was important to know what was being discussed and if hate speech would become hateful action. Kristen even signed a petition to try and have Facebook intervene and remove the moderator. When these

actions did not yield a change and the moderator continued to remove members with dissenting voices, they had an offline discussion among their friends and came to the conclusion that their presence in the Facebook group amplified the impact of the offensive content. They left the group to lower the moderator's numbers and reach because it was the only course of action available to them that would have an impact. Participatory restraint led them to choose to remove themselves from the audience and thus limit the spread of antisemitic content.

Protective curation

Participants described reading and curating information as a way to gratify a desire to protect their socioeconomic status. This includes gathering information to professionally advance in one's career and to maintain the perceived quality of community life.

In regard to professional advancement, participants sought neighborhood information that would be valuable to the growth and development of their businesses. Kristen, of Ocean Ridge, will sometimes find herself scrolling through her Facebook feed and encounter a post that might be useful to her husband who sells steel. When she reads a post about newly proposed construction, she will show him her phone and they will have a face-to-face discussion about whether or not he should make a bid to provide the materials. Abby, of Whitman Circle, is a realtor and finds that her neighborhood groups are a great place to "listen in" and uses it as "market research" on what prices people are willing to pay for homes, and what kind of features they desire in a home. She cites the LIEB CAST podcast, which recently amplified this idea in a podcast titled Real Estate Opportunities by Location in 2020 and 2021 (Lieb and Lieb, 2020). Although she has been using neighborhood Facebook Groups for market research for years, she thought that it was interesting that the pandemic had encouraged not just realtors themselves, but higher level investors to begin joining groups like Upper West Side Moms, a Facebook Group for mothers who live on the wealthy Upper West Side of Manhattan to curate information. Lieb and Lieb (2020) encouraged investors to think about how the pandemic will influence the patterns of migration for wealthy NYC homeowners. They encouraged their podcast listeners to join groups like Upper West Side Moms or Upper East Side Moms and "listen in" to which ex-urban geographic areas were becoming more desirable and to think about how they could (1) scale their businesses to meet the needs of these wealthy migrants, (2) offer venture capital to companies uniquely positioned to serve these demographics, or (3) buy stock in goods and services that target the ex-urban community (Lieb and Lieb, 2020). The efficacy of this curation strategy is confirmed by other participants who explained that they sought the Ocean Ridge and Whitman Circle neighborhood Facebook groups as a way to vet the community before purchasing their home. They sought information on the local school district, the values of their potential neighbors, and the range of services and businesses offered by the community.

By lurking, participants also sought to protect their current professional position in the hopes of professional future advancement. Participants who were small business owners felt reluctant to engage in publicity metrics because they feared professional reprimand. Professional reprimand is when a comment, like, or share leads to a negative professional consequence from an employer or prospective client. As Anne of

Ocean Ridge explains, “I would prefer that people felt that they could come to me if they needed my services. And not [think], ‘well, I don’t want to go to a liberal progressive.’” Sam, of Whitman Circle, who works for his family-owned business, says, “I’ve always had the mindset: if you have nothing to hide, then, who cares? [. . .] But nowadays you gotta watch what you post. They could screenshot what you wrote.” He explains that a screenshot can be enough to harm the reputation of his business. Mallory, of Whitman Circle, is aware that the superintendent of the school where she works makes note of things as seemingly trivial as a faculty member liking a status celebrating a snow day. Colleagues’ posts have been screenshotted by other community members and then submitted to the school district with the submitter urging the superintendent to reprimand the teacher. While Mallory is certain that political posts are potentially damaging, the snow day posts made her realize that any interaction could be twisted to be deemed inappropriate. She said,

I don’t see a problem with saying, “Yay: It’s a snow day!” Everybody likes snow days. [. . .] but evidently in [the superintendent’s] mind this makes people look like they don’t love their job, which makes you unprofessional. How people interpret your words becomes your problem. And I don’t need any more problems.

Participants sought to collect information that would improve their quality of life in their local community. For example, participants often refer to their neighborhood Facebook Groups to contextualize the noise of sirens or helicopters and to obtain safety information. Abby, of Whitman Circle, will read through her Facebook feed first thing in the morning and pay attention to posts about accidents or traffic queries to determine the safest and fastest route to work. After a series of attempted sexual assaults in the Ocean Ridge neighborhood, participants relied on neighborhood groups to track which streets, at what time of day, the attempted assaults occurred. This information was then used to determine when and where to jog, walk dogs, or engage in other outdoor pursuits.

Participants sought to support local businesses as a way to preserve the local economy, which in turn maintains property values in the community. During the New York State-imposed lockdown, participants relied on their neighborhood Facebook groups to determine what restaurants were still open in their community. The desire to support these restaurants was twofold. Participants wanted to reduce the risk of COVID by ordering food for contactless pickup, but they also wanted to ensure that local businesses survived the pandemic lockdown. Abby of Whitman Circle would take note of open restaurants with Family Meal Deals: large portions of food that could be eaten over the course of several meals, and call them to order dinner. She discovered restaurants she had never tried before and told her neighbors and friends about them via socially distant conversation or text message encouraging them to patronize. Anne, from Ocean Ridge, saw a post from another neighborhood group, beyond the scope of this study, that advertised a “bar crawl” supporting three local restaurants. Participants could order a “bar crawl” and would receive a delivery order of three appetizers and three drinks from three different local restaurants. After reading about this, she thought it was a clever idea and she called a restaurant in Ocean Ridge to tell them about it and to suggest that they plan a similar event to raise community spirits and support the restaurant industry. She never

engaged in publicity metrics on any of the Facebook pages associated with these restaurants and she is not professionally affiliated with any restaurants.

Participants sought information not covered in great depth by their local newspaper. Jessica, of Ocean Ridge, feels Facebook has become her “neighborhood newspaper.” She appreciates the opportunity to hear directly from primary sources, naming the group’s coverage of the community’s privatized water utility supplier as an exemplar. After it was revealed that the privatized water had a high level of contaminants, there was a grassroots campaign to develop an Ocean Ridge public water utility. By lurking on these discussions, Jessica was able to make choices for her family about whether or not to upgrade their water filtration system and to identify the local candidates who support these issues.

Limitations

The literacy practices identified in this study are by no means an exhaustive list. Further studies should seek to demonstrate how frequently these self-reported literacy practices occur and in what contexts. This might require the use of eye-tracking camera technologies to observe participants as they are reading. Or it might require participants to include specific examples of posts they read that inspired the action taken (for example, a post that inspired a charitable donation or led to the purchase of a book). Further studies should seek to examine lurker literacies on other kinds of Facebook groups and social media platforms. A major limitation of this study is the lack of diversity of interview participants. NYC suburbs are some of the most segregated areas in the United States (Winslow, 2019). It is essential to replicate this study in communities where Whiteness is not dominant.

Conclusion

The introduction of Receptive reading, Participatory restraint, and Protective curation adds to the collective research on the valuable and participatory ways that lurkers contribute to online and offline communities. The two most popular uses of literacy practices while lurking, search engine research and read for entertainment, indicate that individuals who lurk are making conscious choices about when to engage in publicity metrics that can be seen by other members of the online community and the Facebook platform. Through lurking, participants sought to gratify desires to (1) understand a divergent point of view, (2) verify information, (3) suppress the spread of information, (4) pivot to offline social action, (5) advance professionally, and (6) maintain quality of community life. These themes and the narrative data included in the study that support them underscore the complexity of the decision of when to lurk.

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Note

1. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding did increase during the years corresponding to Trump's presidency. President Trump tried several times to defund the NEA, but bipartisan congressional support sustained the organization and expanded its funding from \$149.8 million (2017) to \$162.3 million (2020) (Bowley, 2021).

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