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Outage of Meta-owned Social Network Sites (SNS)
University students' experiences and insights for strategic communication
practice and its relevance for social acceleration

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Abstract

Outage of Meta-owned Social Network Sites (SNS) - University students' experiences and insights for communication practice and its relevance for social acceleration

This thesis explores the socially constructed phenomenon that has arisen as a result of the proliferation of social network sites that has penetrated our daily lives. The qualitative study analysed how university students experienced the global outage of Facebook, Instagram and, WhatsApp on October 4th, 2021, because of the Meta-owned ecosystem of social media. Moreover, the study examined how 2 groups of university students, coped with the outage by using non-Meta social network sites, other asynchronous and synchronous communication tools, or simply used the outage to disconnect from social media.

The theoretical framework centered on social acceleration to illustrate the advancements in technical acceleration, as well as the uses & gratifications theory to give context from the perspective of university students and their reasons for using social media. Social constructionism was chosen as the research paradigm for the study. The results of the study came up with specific examples of how airlines are expected to develop their Twitter profiles as a major customer complaint management channel because university students have learned to contact airlines through Twitter to communicate their problems. The reactions towards the outage also showed relevance and connection to the theoretical framework. The study also showed how university students viewed SMS texting, and that they would also use LinkedIn as a secondary communication platform if needed.

The data collection method included two focus group discussions of a total of 11 individuals, and the data was analysed through thematic content analysis. The findings from the data indicated that university students are aware they are in constant interactions with people while going about their daily lives, and this gives a heightened sense of an accelerated pace of life because of the synchronous nature of certain social network sites. That they are always in touch with social media means that communicators have to understand their communicative behaviours and be flexible with their strategic communication on social media. The study ends with a call to action for future research within social acceleration and the uses & gratifications theory and the imperative need for communicators to tap into other SNSs for strategic communication.

Keywords: *university students, social media, social network sites, social acceleration, slipping slopes, uses & gratifications theory, strategic communication, Hartmut Rosa*

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I genuinely hope this Master's thesis makes a tangible impact and a positive contribution to the Department of Strategic Communication and brings forward new ideas to the table for future communication scholars to take the next steps for the academic community.

Thank you so much.

Yue Jie

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1. Introduction

Over the last ten years, there has been a rapid rise in digital interconnectivity among the university students of today. These university students comprise the millennials of Generation Y as well as Generation Z. For the purposes of this study, the timeframes that define the generational cohorts are based on Southgate's (2017) definition: Gen Z represents individuals born in 1997 or later, while Gen Y reflects those born between 1982 and 1996. These young individuals can also be known as digital natives (Prensky, 2001) as they have been exposed to technology all their lives and have learned to think and understand the world around them through technology, social media, and smartphone screens. With many of these university students glued to their screens (Knowledge, 2020) which have "become the primary medium through which they relate to the world" (Rosa, 2019, pg 235), it is easy to see that digital media is now commonplace and even pervasive to their everyday lives (Ito et al., 2010; Sinek, 2018). This thesis utilises Rosa's (2019) theoretical framework of social acceleration because social acceleration via social media has effectively become the way in which university students are "being noticed, seen, addressed and contacted - *being in touch with the world*" (pg 239).

1.1 Contextual Background

In approaching this study, it is necessary to consider the high importance placed on social network sites especially as we enter the 2020s. One crucial aspect is to recognise that university students are always on social media to the point that they actually rely on social media because it shapes their lives, organises their schedules, and is a central means of carrying out interactions with people (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Fox & McEwan, 2020). It is very acceptable to use social media to communicate today but it becomes problematic when individuals face difficulty in reducing their use of social media because the constant interactions with others through a screen can be highly addictive. In the worldviews of university students, every interaction that ends up as a notification or a vibration from our smartphones represents a "call from the world" (ibid) from which they feel a sense of belonging that they desperately desire (Heng, 2022, pg. 124).

This thesis is set in the context of the technological outage that Meta-owned SNSs of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp (Marengo et al., 2020) faced in October 2021 (Duffy & Lyngaas, 2021; Sekścińska & Jaworska, 2022). It was an incident where communicative activities within these SNSs came to a stop during the outage because there was an unexpected outage. This meant that even though the SNSs could still be accessed from electronic devices, the platforms themselves could not load or process further active communication beyond the time that they were disrupted. The outage lasted for about six hours and it made it difficult for university students to communicate during this time. Here, university students are best described as a small sub-section of digital natives. The study is limited to students because it helps to narrow the thesis down to one of many groups of digital natives that use social network sites often.

University students interact with their broader social circles at a higher speed, but digital communication tends to be shallow and detached. They may have conversations with multiple people at the same time, but these conversations may lack quality because it is done through the screen, which becomes their sole avenue of communication and interaction with the world. According to Henry (2019), behaviors such as validation-seeking are the primary sources of motivation for young adults to communicate with others online. If people engage with them, it is validation that they are doing something right, or that they are worth interacting with. This reinforces the fact that the constant desire for validation leads to phenomena like dopamine addiction (Sinek, 2018). According to Macit et al. (2018), dopamine is a neuro-chemical created in the brain that is critical for brain functions, including attention, motivation, seeking, and rewarding. It is also responsible for feeling pleasure, and the dopamine loop created by social media is similar to when one is addicted to drugs (ibid). The need for self-validation, together with dopamine addiction to social media notifications (Sinek, 2018) becomes a vicious cycle for university students who find themselves stuck in this never-ending loop.

In the context of this study, some social network sites that have been identified to be used by western university today are Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Twitter (Kemp, 2022), though these are arguably subject to changes as newer platforms are introduced to the social media landscape. These three platforms are where most communication and social media

use happen. Conversational one-to-one and group communication (Costa et al., 2022) occur mostly on WhatsApp. Instagram and Facebook have these functionalities too but are more focused on visual, content-based communication. This means that most communicative activity takes place on all SNSs daily.

When university students are so accustomed to having this form of communication happening all around the world as they go about their daily interactions, it becomes difficult for them not to expect the same of others. With the widespread proliferation of social media, it is then evident that communicators need to be on SNSs that provide one-to-many communication capabilities, such as Facebook and Instagram. However, communicators also ought to know how university students use SNSs and the type of communicative activities that take place. For instance, when everything is going smoothly, SNSs enable communication to take place seamlessly. But when an outage occurs, there is an abrupt change in communication, and this becomes difficult the longer the outage lasts. This is because SNS outages prevent people from communicating with one another, and also makes it hard for organisations to communicate with their customers and the public.

1.2 Research Problem

Despite an increased research focus on consumer-based social media use, there remains inadequate research pertaining to the strategic use of social media by communicators, and the theoretical connection of social media usage to social acceleration. This brings the study to its research problem, where almost every university student uses social network sites actively and the outage of Meta-owned SNSs caused a social interruption for many university students. Communicators have to realise that an outage on Meta-owned SNSs does not have to mean a complete outage in communication altogether. Due to the outage, the problem has arisen whereby communicators may not fully know how to best interact with university students and utilise non-Meta communication channels to maintain communicative activities. It is known that SNSs have become essential to maintain basic contact and share information (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Fox & McEwan, 2020). It is clear that social media is here to stay, and with technology constantly accelerating at a much faster pace than expected, it is imperative that research is

conducted to find out the extent to which university students need these technologies, and subsequently how they experienced the outage. It is also important to go under the surface and find out how they coped to meet their communicative needs during the outage, because their reactions are key to understanding how social acceleration happens among university students.

1.3 Study Aim and Research Questions

The primary aim of the study is to investigate how university students experienced the outage and coped with the inability to use Meta-owned social media since it has been established that university students are constantly preoccupied with Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp and may have difficulty cutting down on their usage (Le Busque & Mingoia, 2021). With the outage, it is important to observe whether they were affected by the outage, and if so, how affected they were. There are many variables that could determine the university students' reactions towards the outage and their actions during it. The abruptness of the outage caused negative emotions for some people because it prevented them from communicating digitally with their social circles, both within their home countries or abroad. It also made it difficult or impossible to schedule or plan things with others via these Meta-owned SNSs, causing much inconvenience. This disconnect was abrupt and lasted for a quarter of a day. Therefore, through this outage, the thesis is set out to glean insights into how university students experienced the outage from Meta-owned SNSs, their coping mechanisms, and find out the non-Meta SNSs or communication channels they used.

The aim of this thesis is to provide communicators with a view into the personal lives of university students and to understand their thoughts and feelings when they experienced a deceleration in their use of Meta-owned SNSs as a result of the outage. It would benefit communicators because they would be provided with data that allows them to understand the form of communication that university students are using on a daily basis and how they would manage their communicative activities if most of their communication takes place on Meta-owned social network sites. The research seeks to determine if they instinctively sought other means of communication, experienced feelings of loneliness, or simply used the outage as an opportunity to disconnect from social media. The goal is for university students to expound on

the extent to which their lives may be centered around social media and their thought process during the outage period. This is because although social downtime due to technological outages is rare, communicators still have to understand that it can happen. That being said, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1. How did university students experience the technological outage that occurred on October 4th, 2021?

The intention is to find out how university students went through the six-hour period in which Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp were disrupted. It is to learn the emotions they associated with the affected Meta-owned SNSs and to delve into the feelings they developed during the outage. The question investigates the empirical phenomenon from the individual perspective of international students who experienced it and to understand how they perceived the situation.

RQ2. How did university students cope during the outage of Meta-owned social network sites and which non-Meta social network sites did they use?

This second research question is intended to find out the coping mechanisms of university students during the outage, if they had worked with solutions to avoid the social roadblock and whether the workaround solutions they used worked. This is to observe their instinctive reactions to the phenomenon and to see, on a human level, the actions they took to cope with the sudden deceleration. Their emotional reaction towards the event as well as their level of satisfaction with non-Meta channels is intended to provide communicators with the knowledge on which non-Meta SNSs are to be used as back-up platforms.

1.4 Research Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study covered international students in Lund, Sweden as university students and their individual experiences of unexpected social deceleration during the extensive technological outage. Covering university students in Sweden is apposite because the outage

occurred during the evening hours in Sweden, where they would be in active communication with their social circles. The incident is used as an empirical phenomenon to highlight the importance of Meta-owned SNSs in the lives of university students. It is also used to emphasise that communicators have to know the communication channels that university students would turn to in the event that they cannot be reached via the Meta-owned SNSs. With fast-changing times and inevitable advancements in technology, communicators have to understand the communication patterns of today's university students and adapt to them accordingly.

In going about this study, it is to be noted that the outage mainly affected the residents of the Americas and continental Europe, regardless of their countries of origin. However, as the thesis is focused on residents of continental Europe, the experiences of the residents of the Americas is not taken into consideration. The empirical study consists of focus group discussions that were conducted with 11 international students of Lund University between the ages of 18 and 35. The outage was central to the discussions as the catalyst event that contextualised the issue and made participants aware of the importance of their individual experiences.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, the literature review is presented in key themes with relevance to the research study. First, it provides an overview of social network sites, university students' social media use, and social acceleration as a theoretical driving cause of this phenomenon. Secondly, the thesis zooms into the importance of social media for business communication scholars. Finally, the case is formed when the literature makes an explicit connection with the empirical phenomenon which is connected to the thesis study and how it makes a contribution to research. In the end, the literature review is concluded with a literature synthesis.

2.1 Social Network Sites and University Students: The Pinnacle of Social Acceleration

Two decades into the 21st century, the world has experienced drastic changes in all areas of life, in particular within networked digital communication. The term *social media* became widely used only in the early 21st century with various definitions, and the meaning of *social media* is contested (Meikle, 2016; Fox & McEwan, 2020). One definition by Carr and Hayes (2015, pg. 49) was “Internet-based, persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content”. Meikle (2016, pg. 6) offered another definition of social media as “*networked database platforms that combine public with personal communication*”.

One of the subsets of social media is the concept of social networking sites, which Donath and boyd¹ (2004, pg. 12) defined as “online environments where people create a self-descriptive profile and then connect with other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections”. Another concept of social network sites is defined by boyd and Ellison (2008) as services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system. They acknowledge the terms “social network site” and “social networking site” both appear in public discourse to describe this phenomenon and are used interchangeably, but are more precise in their definition that “networking” is not the primary purpose on these sites; these sites mainly serve as a “network” for users to communicate with people already part of

¹ The name of danah boyd is purposely not capitalised (DeBelle, 2007)

their extended social network (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). For this reason, the term “social network sites” (SNS) will be employed in this thesis.

The primary functions of social media are to interact with others and share information, and the continuous developments of new media along with the revolution of SNSs have led to vast changes in how people communicate with one another and how information is disseminated, which is evident in the production, distribution, and reception of media content (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Papathanassopoulos, 2011; Meikle, 2016; Harrison, 2017; Fox & McEwan, 2020). The purchase of Instagram and WhatsApp by Facebook² (Shead, 2019) further revolutionised SNSs as it led to the creation of the social media ecosystem (Schultz, 2007; Williams et al., 2012) dominated by Facebook (Marengo et al., 2020). This makes one thing clear: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp are among the most common social media and messaging applications (Fox & McEwan, 2020; Campbell & Ling, 2020) today.



Fig. 1. Digital 2021: Global Overview Report

² Facebook, Inc. is now known as Meta Platforms, Inc. as of October 2021. Meta is the parent organization of Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp, among other subsidiaries (Shead, 2019).

According to Kemp (2021), more than 4 billion people in the world are active users of SNS (see Figure 1) and data from Kemp (2022) indicates that Facebook (14.5%), Instagram (14.8%) and WhatsApp (15.7%) are arguably considered to be the 3 favorite SNSs globally, for both men and women from 16- to 34-year-olds (see Appendix C). In terms of demographics, 82% of adults above the age of 16 have a social media profile, and Facebook and Instagram are the most widely used platforms (see Appendix D), with 69% of 16- to 24-year-olds using Facebook and 78% using Instagram (Online Nation 2021). Social media is commonly used not only for communicating with friends and family but also for the dissemination of news and information (Delaporte & Bahia, 2022, pg. 38), which means it is a key way in which many people get news (Online Nation 2021, pg. 153), and a significant portion of younger people prefer to get their news through social media such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube (Malmlund et al., 2022, pg. 35). Statistics show that up to 50% of 15- to 24-year-olds in Britain use Facebook for news (Online Nation 2021, pg. 152), and among Scandinavians, 65% of 18- to 24-year-olds and 61% of 25- to 34-year-olds list social media as their preferred source of news (see Appendix E; Digital Consumer Trends 2021). It is thus no surprise that younger generations turn to social media for news. This trend marks a shift away from traditional news sources and sheds light on a major generational difference (Malmlund et al., 2022, pg. 32).

In the broad social media spectrum, WhatsApp finds its relevance as a classical communication tool (Rigamonti et al., 2020) in the context of mobile communication, compared to other SNSs which are more content-oriented. However, Costa et al. (2022) argued that WhatsApp is more than that - “It is a configuration of different affordances that enable different group sizes and multiple modes of communication: asynchronous and synchronous sharing of audio and video, text, memes, photos, and emojis.” (pg. 2). Therefore it deserves its own recognition as “polymedia” (Costa et al., 2022; Madianou, 2016) among other SNSs.

In defining the university students selected for this study, it is important to note that the university students in the study were the age of 35 or younger. This means although they are digital natives, the term does not apply to them exclusively. Instead, these students are best described as a sub-branch of digital natives as they do fall under the general category of digital natives. Therefore to avoid the risk of overgeneralisation, the term “university students” is used.

Circling back to digital natives, the term was first coined by Prensky (2001). He defined them “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet, and it refers to the first generation born in a digital world permeated by information communication technologies and grew up with such technology (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014). University students experience stress and mental health concerns during their studies (Amin & Khan, 2020), and numerous research studies have investigated the various uses of social media by university students. These could be supervisor relationships, employment prospects, and access to resources, and they use social media to mitigate these stressors (Le Busque & Mingoia, 2021). Ahmad and Pawar’s (2021) findings suggest that university students use social media in their search for career opportunities such as finding internships and post-study employment.

According to Htay et al. (2020), Twitter has also been found to be useful for postgraduate students, in a study of Master’s degree students from various continents exploring the benefits and barriers of using Twitter. They found that postgraduate students generally found Twitter useful for educational purposes such as sharing links and disseminating information. However, they also noted that barriers to Twitter were privacy concerns and unfamiliarity with Twitter’s functions. Students of the University of Bangladesh most commonly used Facebook and YouTube, followed by Twitter, to build better relationships with students and teachers, increase collaborations and keep updated with information (Munshi et al., 2018). These findings highlight that postgraduate students utilise a range of social media for various reasons (Le Busque & Mingoia, 2021). At international universities such as Lund University in Sweden, a significant number of students would be foreigners coming from abroad. This means they are likely to use SNSs too, to share recent memories to stay interacted with their home countries (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013 as cited in Kahraman et al., 2020, pg. 445), with Facebook being the most used SNS among university students worldwide (Lenhart et al., 2010; Cheung et al., 2011).

When considering university students’ extensive usage of SNSs (Amin & Khan, 2020), there comes the risk they are addicted to SNSs. This is supported by findings from Bhargava and Velasquez (2020) that indicate SNSs design their platforms in an addictive way, because they are intrinsically in the “attention-economy” business (Twenge et al., 2019). In the literature within

this area of research, the biggest negative impacts and concerns about social media use is focused on the addictive nature of social media (Amin & Khan, 2020; Larson, 2021). This is a real problem as a life without social media is inconceivable for many people (Grau et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2019 as cited in Brailovskaia et al., 2020). Kuss and Griffiths (2011, pg. 3529) argued that social media addiction falls in the category of *cyber-relationship addiction* (e.g. addiction to online relationships) (see: Young, 1999; Grau et al., 2019) since social network sites are for people to “establish and maintain both online and offline relationships”.

One thing to note is that rather than becoming addicted to the *medium* - the specific social network site - people may develop an addiction to specific activities they carry out online (Griffiths, 2000 as cited in Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). This makes sense as there is usually no mention of specific SNS that contributes to social media addiction. This can however be argued from the perspective of clinical psychology, where ‘*Facebook Addiction Disorder*’ (Guedes et al., 2016; Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2017) exists in instances where some people use certain SNSs excessively. For the purposes of this research study, this thesis will take the general cause which is social media addiction. Larson (2021) stated that social media addiction comprises a range of addictive tendencies that include fixation on social media, compulsive use, mood modification, and tolerance and withdrawal (see: Lin et al., 2017).

Moreover, the widespread use of SNSs on smartphones (Salehan & Negahban, 2013), coupled with the fact that digital natives thrive on instant gratification (Prensky, 2001; Sinek, 2018) means that Internet addiction and more specifically, social media addiction, is a grave concern. In another study by Macit et al. (2018), an aspect of social media use is the social-validation feedback loop, which is the reason university students thrive on instant gratification. Findings from their study indicate that social media addiction due to the intensive use of social media can be compared to dopamine, a stimulant chemical produced by the human brain since dopamine is responsible for pleasure feeling.

Most of this research on social network sites, digital natives and communicative technologies can be built upon theoretically with the uses & gratifications theory and the phenomenon of social acceleration developed by Rosa (2013). The discourse of acceleration and

deceleration has arguably accelerated in the recent decades as a reaction to the exponential increase in speed through the digital revolutions that have occurred since the turn of the century (ibid, pg. 43). This acceleration in speed, especially in the context of digital revolutions, can be seen evidently in the penetration of electronic communication devices and social media use among university students today. According to Ohiagu and Okorie (2014), young adults are one of the prominent users of social media, since the digital age is believed to belong to youths. Over time, this has positively impacted their lives as it allowed them to be aware, informed, and more educated about global news and information.

2.2 Strategic Communication with Social Media

This section touches on outages and the use of social media for business communication. In reviewing the present literature, a study by Grandhi et al. (2020) was found to have posed the question of an “Internet-less world” through a hypothetical complete Internet outage and how prepared society is for it. Although the outage referenced in this thesis pales in comparison to a full-fledged Internet outage as the paper described, it is worth taking into account the authors’ notes:

“Since there is no prior research to form a full scenario, the authors iteratively developed the wording that describes the plausible future of the Internet being down for a long period of time.”

Grandhi et al. (2020) also stated that their paper “is the first to explore perceptions of the potential impacts of an Internet outage.” Through a mixed methods approach, they sought to find out how university students would perceive the impacts on their lives should the Internet go out for an extended period of time. Their results showed that, when presented with the scenario, university students could think rationally the possible impacts that a complete Internet outage would have on the individual level as well as the societal level, and how it affects human relationships and the communicative efficiencies afforded by Internet technology. Grandhi et al. (2020)’s research thus inadvertently becomes a very relevant point of reference in this thesis, where the aim here is to notice how university students would actually react during an outage of the most-used SNSs in the world.

For research on social media for communicators in business, Meredith (2012) raised the topic of social media as an important area of research for business communication scholars and produced a discussion on why communicators have to embrace social media for business. He pinpointed the fact that social media is booming, which means that business communicators need to be involved in the strategic communication process when it comes to social media and how to maximise it effectively. He emphasised that communicators have to consider social media within the scope of a larger, properly defined organisational communication channel strategy and that social media is a valuable communication tool to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders (ibid).

Meredith (2012)'s suggestions highlighted the fact that there is a lack of research around the use of social media by organisations for strategic purposes. This fact was noted by Valentini (2016) in her review of *Strategic Communication, Social Media and Democracy*, "A reader of strategic communication will be surprised to note that just a few chapters focus on organisations and their use of social media for strategic purposes." With the increasing use of SNSs by university students to access information and share and produce content, communicators have to know how to leverage social media strategically in order to stay relevant with university students.

In an in-depth study of social media communication in organisations, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) surveyed the similarities and differences in the deployment of social media in organisations across various countries within Australasia and Europe. Their findings indicated that the types of social media used by organisations are similar, and communication professionals generally describe themselves as competent in their knowledge and understanding of social media. However, the study's interview of social media specialists found that organisations do not have a social media strategy in place that would serve as a guide to integrate social media communication with strategic communication. On a more alarming note, the study's findings indicated that only 31 per cent of organisations in Europe and 35 per cent of Australasian organisations have specific policies or guidelines for social media, and even *fewer* have strategies for social media. This is an important fact because the lack of a social media strategy

means that communicators may not be equipped with the knowledge on the actions to take to continue strategic communication on social media during an outage.

In the context of strategic communication, one of the recent studies was conducted in 2013 when Heath et al. (2013) explored and “developed an understanding of organisational engagement in social media to motivate strategic directed actions aligned with organisational goals” (pg. 2). In an environment where organisations are expected to engage with their stakeholders (ibid), Heath’s study was empirically motivated by the lack of literature regarding the challenge that organisations face in constructing an effective strategy for social media. The strategic use of social media becomes especially crucial knowing that many communicators operate without a social media policy (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Therefore, the onus is on communicators to proactively engage in social media in order to drive directed actions and advance the organisation’s strategic goals (Heath et al., 2013). Heath’s findings on the dearth of suitable literature pertaining to social media strategy for organisations corroborated with Macnamara and Zerfass’ (2012) study.

2.3 Conclusion and Reiteration for the Study

The case for a real outage from Meta-owned SNSs has not really been established because such an incident tends to be unpredictable, since no one can know how long the next outage will last. However, when it does happen, there are several learning lessons that can be derived from it. Thus, it is important to take this example of an outage as a starting point to notice, on an individual level, how university students would really behave when social acceleration is forced to come to a stop and the actions they would take to restore their level of communicative ability. Despite the growing number of research studies on consumer-based social media usage, not much research has been conducted on communicators’ strategic use of social media. As such, the empirical phenomenon used in this study will highlight a pragmatic approach that communicators have to take in learning how to best interact with university students.

In summary, the university students of today that are enrolled in international universities are active and highly dependent on social media for various uses. They also join the most commonly used SNSs to be in the same network as their peers. Communicators have also jumped on the bandwagon in order to connect with university students and reflect the trends in consumer behavior. However, what communicators may not be aware is the coping mechanisms that university students utilise in the absence of Meta-owned SNSs and how intermeshed their daily communicative activities are. Knowing what university students will do helps communicators compensate for the the lack of a comprehensive social media strategy (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Heath et al., 2013). Since communicators rely only on guidelines and policies to navigate SNSs and leverage on social media tools.

For the purposes of this study, the words “extensive”, “technological” and “outage” will be defined³ as follows: “Extensive” refers to the state of being lengthy in terms of time; “technological” refers to being related to technology; “outage” refers to an interruption or failure in the supply of power. The extensive technological outage was a period in which university students could not transmit or receive, produce and share new content or otherwise interact with each other. This meant that although the networks were accessible from electronic devices, they could not load or process active communication beyond the time that the outage happened.

³ Definitions provided by [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)

3. Theoretical Framework

This third chapter presents the theoretical framework that provides an analytical lens to examine the research study. This framework sets the boundaries in which the empirical phenomenon will be examined. Social acceleration is the overarching general theory of modernity to explain the scope of digital communication and the intricate relationship between social media and university students. Thereafter the uses and gratifications theory is used as the specific, thematically focused theory to explain the reasons people use certain social media to gratify specific needs. The audience-centered approach of this theory affirms its relevance in this study in the context of the empirical phenomenon.

3.1 A Systematic Theory and Phenomenology of Social Acceleration

The theory of modernity is characterised by the phenomenon of social acceleration, a largely inevitable process where technology, social change, and the pace of life mutually influence each other (Rosa, 2013). The theory of social acceleration was developed by Rosa as it emerged in the twentieth century amidst technological innovations as a result of industrialisation, and he describes it as comprising three dimensions: *technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life*. Each dimension, while analytically distinct and distinguishable from each other, is interconnected and empirically related to each other (ibid).

Technical acceleration is technological in nature (e.g. machine-based) and is the most consequential shape of modern acceleration. This is evident in the processes concerning transport and communication. For instance, the modern-day experience of air travel is due to the increase in speed of transportation. The experience is akin to a “compression” of space, therefore the world seems to have shrunk as a result. Technical acceleration in communication is evident in both asynchronous and synchronous communication, where interactions are possible at any time independent of the respective location of the conversation partners. This is relevant in the context of this thesis because the possibilities of accelerated communication are shaped by social network sites in synchronous communication. University students have grown to expect

real-time interactions on social media, and this leads to the uses and gratifications theory discussed below.

The acceleration of social change, though analytically distinguishable, goes empirically together with technical acceleration. The main difference is that social change represents an acceleration *of* society, and technical acceleration is understood as acceleration *within* society (pg. 77). According to Rosa (ibid), social change refers to the *tempo* of change; that is, the *rates of change themselves change* - they accelerate (pg. 74). He defined social change as “*an increase of the rate of decay of action-orienting experiences and expectations and as a contraction of time periods that determine the present of respective functional, value and action spheres*” (pg. 76). This means that because of technical acceleration, society appears to accelerate in tandem. Rosa concludes that technical acceleration serves as a powerful driver of social change and the acceleration of social change is a direct consequence of technical acceleration (pg. 154).

Thirdly, Rosa defined the acceleration of the pace of life by two components - objective and subjective. *Objectively*, an increased tempo of life involves condensed episodes of action. Daily activities are still carried out but over a shorter duration of time. One can directly increase the speed of action of doing something, and decrease the empty times *between activities*. Hence the description of “condensation” of action episodes. This means the pace of life can be accelerated by direct acceleration (doing something faster) or by multitasking, making it possible to complete a set of actions faster (pg. 78). *Subjectively*, due to the increased tempo of life, it is subsequently expressed that one lacks time, is pressed for time, or is anxious about “not keeping up” (pg. 79). These perceptions become an obvious reaction to the acceleration and condensation of action episodes that define an increased pace of life.

According to Harvey (as cited in Rosa, 2013), the culture of modernity is a reaction to the transformed experiences of space and time that is a result of “time-space-compression” and has to be conceived as a consequence of the acceleration of the pace of life and the annihilation of space through time. Social acceleration has turned into a self-propelling process that takes the three dimensions of acceleration into reciprocal relationships of mutual escalation. This produces *more* acceleration and becomes a type of “feedback system” (Rosa, 2013, pg. 151). In society,

the social aim and effect of technical acceleration are to *save time*, meaning to reduce the time needed to do things and free up more time. However, this leads to the consequence of a heightened pace of life. An increased speed in completing an activity creates a spillover effect and makes people want to complete the next activity in the shortest time possible regardless of the amount of time available to complete it (pg. 156, see Appendix F). This creates a paradoxical phenomenon that results in “time pressure and the experience of racing time” (pg. 131).

Following this phenomenon comes the concept of “slipping slopes” (pg. 108), whereby the accelerated rate of social change becomes so expedited that it becomes necessary for individuals to keep up with developments in society, especially with technology. Rosa explained that the compelling need to accelerate is rooted in the social structure known as “slipping slopes”, as it forces individuals into a *reactive situational attitude* (pg. 295). To not keep up with developments does not only mean to stagnate, it also means to be falling back and left behind. As there is a high rate of change due to the increased pace of life, there is growing pressure for both individuals and organisations to adapt. This results in the feeling of standing not only on a slippery slope but on terrain that is itself slipping away, albeit at varying speeds, as if one were on “slipping slopes” or a down escalator. In order to maintain one’s position, avoid missed opportunities and to keep up with synchronised society, one has to always monitor and keep pace with changes in the social environment. One has to compensate for phases of standstill or temporary withdrawal with an increased catch-up tempo (pg. 306). The concept of “slipping slopes” can be aptly described as: *If you aren’t climbing up, you’re climbing down* (pg. 173).

This theory and phenomenology of social acceleration forms the backbone of the theory of modernity that is relevant in this thesis because the processes of technical acceleration and social acceleration give rise to time-space-compression and allow synchronous communication to take place 24/7 in any part of the world. This enables university students to use social media every waking hour to communicate digitally with someone or express themselves while going about their daily activities. This gives them the perception that they do not have enough time, because the providing of constant availability and being in constant contact is considered a form of social activity that has become acceptable in 21st century society. In applying itself to the outage of Meta-owned SNSs, this thesis takes its position in the opposite end of the phenomenon

- social deceleration - and the concept of slipping slopes to explore what would happen to university students when this exact form of social activity from social media is abruptly and temporarily decelerated due to external circumstances. This raises the question of how university students will still cope and manage their behavior in the absence of social media and the forceful deceleration of the pace of life because the eradication of social media would mean being cut off from digital society and relying on asynchronous communication tools.

3.2 Uses And Gratifications Theory

In media research studies, the main theoretical approach that considers the process in which media is used in the context of satisfying the needs of people is the theory of uses and gratification (Tolokonnikova et al., 2020). It attempts to explain the uses and functions of the media for individuals, groups, and society in general (Twente, 2003, pg. 20), and it questions the way people use media and the gratifications they get from it. According to McQuail (2001), the theory originated from Katz et al. (1973) who attempted to conceptualise this phenomenon, but this has been the topic of much debate and critique. Tolokonnikova et al. (2020) argued this theory does not belong to a particular author because it has been referred to and developed by numerous researchers throughout the development of scientific knowledge. For this thesis, the first published version by Katz et al. (1973) will be used to explain the phenomenon followed by adapting it to the modern uses of social media and gratifications of university students.

The uses and gratifications perspective is often used to study audience uses of mass media based on social and psychological needs (Vincent & Basil, 1997). At its core, the uses and gratifications theory assumes that people actively seek out the mass media to satisfy their individual needs (Twente, 2003). The sources from which people satisfy their gratifications are three distinct types: media content, exposure to the media *per se*, and the social context specific to the situation of exposure to different media (Katz et al., 1973, pg. 514). In today's social media world, this is supported by Griffiths' (2000) research that people *may* have an addiction to social media when they feel the gratifying need to keep up-to-date with it. Katz et al. (1973, pg. 517) suggested that media-related needs could be created due to certain social factors, and two of the five listed factors were: Social situations create an awareness of problems that demand

attention, information about which may be sought in the media; Social situations provide a field of expectations and familiarity with certain media materials, which must then be monitored in order to sustain membership of valued social groupings.

For the thesis at hand, this means that in the interconnected world of social media today with information at our fingertips, news travels fast, much faster than traditional media such as newspapers. There is thus a social necessity for people, including university students, to be socially adept and constantly aware of the latest news. This would allow them to be in tune with an important period of socialisation to news media and form close relationships with peers (Vincent & Basil, 1997). Following this, the proliferation of social media and having grown up with technology means there is an expectation for university students to be fluent with certain media types. In 2022, this refers to knowledge of the plethora of SNSs used by most people. If they do not keep themselves up-to-date with this knowledge, they risk losing membership in valued social groupings.

In using the uses and gratifications theory, it is important to understand that university students do not always use the same SNSs to get their gratifications, and may prefer to use other mediums depending on the latest trends in their social circles. According to Quan-Haase and Young (2010), the adoption and use of digital technologies follow social trends that dictate which SNSs become dominant during certain periods of time, where some mediums turn obsolete after reaching a high level of penetration, and then other SNSs start gaining popularity. The mediums that become obsolete do not become replaced, rather, they are integrated into a bundle of SNSs for university students to use and simply become a secondary relevance for communication (ibid). This means university students do not embrace a single form of social media; instead, they tend to employ a range of tools for communication (Quan-Haase et al., 2002). They embrace these new tools and adopt them as part of their communication repertoire (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

Lull (1980) addressed the connection between personal and mediated communication regarding the viewing of television, where he established a typology of the social uses of television. One of the two typologies he suggested was the *structural* use of television, in which

television can be an environmental resource. This means that television was used as a companion for individuals when they are doing an activity and leave the television running in the background to contribute to the overall social environment (Lull, 1980, pg. 202). This was the case decades ago with television, but the same can still be said today regarding digital devices and social media. The nonstop stream of media content across different SNSs and the possibility to interact with people round the clock becomes a form of companionship for university students who may, for example, scroll through Facebook or Instagram while commuting or waiting for their trains and buses to arrive.

Due to these media transformations over the years, media-based needs turn into *basic* human needs, and the needs that could be met through the act of mediation can now be addressed as a result of the mediatisation process where the university students of today embody the fundamental changes in media practices that transform theoretical knowledge (Tolokonnikova et al., 2020). Therefore, on top of their own social media usage to satisfy their gratifications, university students are expected to conform to social norms by keeping in touch with the latest news, and the most efficient way to do it now is through social media. According to Rubin (2009, pg 168), researchers used typologies to describe and explain media consumption as these typologies suggest the complexities of media uses and effects. Some researchers also tried to propose synthesising uses and gratifications with media effects research as there is an overlap between the two fields because both theories seek to explain the outcomes or consequences of communication (Rubin, 2009, pg. 171-172). However, for clarity, the uses and gratifications theory will still be referred to in this thesis.

In conclusion, the theory of social acceleration together with the uses and gratifications theory form the theoretical framework that situates this thesis within strategic communication. The audience-centered approach provides a new lens to examine strategic communication from the perspective of the users to allow social science researchers to understand the effects of social media, and for communicators to understand the sociological reasons behind the use of Meta-owned SNSs.

4. Methodology

This fourth chapter serves to describe and outline the research strategy that was implemented for this study. It begins with a brief discussion on symbolic interactionism and social constructionism which are the research paradigms the study follows. Then it continues to describe in detail the research design in terms of sample selection, method, data collection procedure as well as the analytical approach taken in the study. The aim of the thesis is to find out how university students experienced the outage of SNSs and their coping mechanisms towards it, based on the proposed research questions. The chapter ends with the trustworthiness criteria of the study and the ethical considerations taken into account.

4.1 Research Paradigm

By inclination, most qualitative orientations found in the social sciences are best described as *non-positivistic*; that is, they approach questions of social reality and knowledge production from a problematised perspective. In doing so, it emphasises the constructed nature of social reality, the constitutive role of language and the value of research as critique (Prasad, 2018, pg. 7). This thesis is encapsulated in the research paradigm of social constructionism which finds its roots in sociology and social psychology. There are also several varieties of social constructionism, which makes it difficult to come up with a single description of social constructionism that is suitable for every social constructionist (Craib, 1997; Burr, 2015).

This thesis follows Burr's (2015) approach to social constructionism where two assumptions are employed - *a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge* and *knowledge is sustained by social processes*. These assumptions find their relevance in this study because university students take social media and their knowledge of interactions on social media for granted. Adopting a critical stance enables this generation to challenge conventional knowledge and to be suspicious of their assumptions about the world (ibid). In addition, it is imperative to understand university students' interactions with each other daily through social media as a social construct. The common way of understanding each other is aided by language

and discourse, where the shared versions of knowledge are constructed through the social processes of daily interactions between people (Burr, 2015; Kelm, 2011).

It is worth noting that symbolic interactionism is often cited as foundational to social constructionism (Butt, 2003), and its terminology refers to *an interactionist concept of self* (see Blumer, 1962 in Burr, 2015). In symbolic interactionism, both society and individuals arise from interaction and communication between people (Burr, 2015 pg. 217). This is a natural occurrence because people are social animals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) who continually construct the social world which turns into the reality to which they must respond. Creswell and Poth (2018, pg. 24) assert that people seek to understand the world in which they live and work, where they develop varied and multiple subjective meanings of their experiences that are directed towards particular objects. The caveat is that human beings cannot construct the world in any way they choose - it is a world already constructed for them in their environment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966 as cited in Burr, 2015).

4.2 Research Design

In line with the study's aim to find out university students' social media behaviors on various SNSs and their personal experiences of the technological outage, this was an interpretive research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and thus a qualitative method was employed. The qualitative research method that was chosen is a semi-structured, focus group interview. This consisted of focus groups comprising two groups of Lund University international students between the ages of 21 and 35, and there were 11 participants in total. Here is a recap of the research questions:

RQ1: How did university students experience the technological outage that occurred on October 4th, 2021?

RQ2: How did university students cope during the outage of Meta-owned social network sites and which non-Meta social network sites did they use?

The source of data for this study were international students of Lund University between the ages of 21 and 35, as of 31st December 2022. Some criteria were established prior to seeking suitable participants for the focus group. These were the frequency in which these participants used social media, which refers to the number of times they use social media on a daily basis. Other criteria were whether they had accounts and profiles on the relevant platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, age restrictions for university students only, and general awareness of the outage.

Sampling

The sampling strategy that was used for this research study is nonprobability sampling by means of a mixture of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. Nonprobability sampling was a necessity in this qualitative study because the sample cannot be randomised and therefore subjective methods had to be used to decide the participants that would be included in the sample (Etikan et al., 2016). For the sampling approach, convenience sampling methods were used. As this was a research study conducted at the postgraduate level, convenience sampling was practical under time constraints and allowed the researcher to use those who are available. This strategy helps to save time, money, and effort, but at the expense of information and credibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pg. 28; Dörnyei, 2007, pg. 129). On the other hand, *strategic* and *purposive* sampling (Miles et al., 2014) was used to select and filter the participants because focus group interviews were conducted as the method of data collection, and therefore a strategic selection of participants was necessary to ensure that a saturated and rich set of data can be produced for analysis (Dörnyei, 2007). Lastly, in qualitative research, it is essential that all the participants experienced the phenomenon being studied because they would sufficiently represent people who experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pg. 157).

Sources of data

For this study, international students of Lund University were selected to participate. They would have to be geographically within the continent of Europe in October 2021 because

the European timezone meant that residents of Europe were in their waking hours when the incident occurred. However, selected participants' countries of origin were mixed; they came from America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Australia - fitting the criteria of international students which is the scope of the study. The tables below are an overview of the focus groups and the breakdown of participants in each group. The names of the students are fictitious and were created to protect the anonymity of the students' identities.

Focus Group 1

International student	Country of origin	Level of study
Isra	Turkey	First-year student
Jessica	USA	First-year student
Steven	Singapore	First-year student
Elaine	Singapore	Second-year student
Elin	Sweden	Second-year student
Leon	China	Second-year student

Focus Group 2

International student	Country of origin	Level of study
Samuel	Australia	First-year student
Fitri	Indonesia	Second-year student
Mahmoud	Egypt	Second-year student
Deniz	Turkey	Second-year student
Samantha	USA	Second-year student

Data collection method

The data collection method was focus group interviews. Focus groups are a planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. This was chosen because the group format of focus groups is based on the collective experiences of group brainstorming - participants reacting to the issues and points. The interaction within the group can also yield high-quality data as a result of a deep and insightful discussion. (Dörnyei, 2007, pg. 144). In this empirical phenomenon of an extensive technological outage, the incident affected many individuals at the same time and came unexpectedly. This led to individual experiences that can be similar and yet different in many ways - despite experiencing the same event. This means these individual similar or contrasting experiences can result in a collective group experience, warranting the case for focus groups where a “synergistic environment” can be created (Dörnyei, 2007; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

According to Dörnyei (2007, pg. 146), a notable strength of focus groups is the flexible and information-rich nature of the method, which means it is often used in mixed methods research. However, it must also be noted that in the case of this research study, focus groups are used as a standalone method of inquiry (ibid). Conversely, there are several weaknesses of focus groups as mentioned by Dörnyei (2007): it takes time to prepare and set up, improvisation is needed because of the low number of questions in the interview guide, certain participants may dominate the research process, and a video recording may be needed instead of audio recording. These weaknesses were addressed as follows: Preparation and set-up for the focus group were carried out through careful time management and venue management together with the participants. The researcher also kept in mind to moderate the focus group in order to improvise when needed. For participants who dominated the research process, the researcher as the moderator signaled interest to other participants to let them know they should say something as well. Lastly, as there were multiple people involved, it means there were several voices heard in the discussion. Relying on voices in an audio recording would be a technically and unnecessarily difficult task, and therefore a video recording was done instead.

Data gathering procedures

The data was collected in March 2022 in the city of Lund, Sweden using Study Rooms provided by Lund University. To find participants, an advertisement was sent out to the “[International Students in Lund](#)” group on Facebook, including preliminary questions using Google Forms to find volunteers that were interested and willing to take part in the study. From the results of these questions, strategic and purposive sampling was carried out to sort participants into groups according to age, social media behavior, and time availability. This purposive allocation by social media behavior ensured a good mix of social media users within the same group. It helped to spark a good debate for the discussion and produced a rich set of data for analysis.

Data collection instrument

With focus groups used as the data collection method, the instrument of data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. This was chosen because it offered a compromise between two extremes - structured and unstructured interviews (Dörnyei, 2007, pg. 136). Semi-structured interview as a format is open-ended and lets the participants elaborate on the issues in an exploratory way, where the researcher as the moderator provided guidance and direction but also followed up on interesting developments. It also allowed the participants to elaborate on certain issues that were brought up (ibid). Since there was a portion of the interview that is structured, this format of interviewing required an ‘interview guide’ that was made in advance prior to the focus group discussions (Dörnyei, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

According to McCracken (1998), the interview guide is indispensable given the demanding objectives of the study and the multiple roles the researcher has to undertake during the interview. For this study, the interview guide was constructed in the form of question blocks organised by topic. The organisation of questions in blocks helped the researcher to clearly steer the discussion into and out of topics, and to keep the researcher on track to ask the topics needed to evoke the required answers. The purpose of the questions in each block was intended to ask specific questions related to the case study, the memories of the participants, and the feelings that

were associated with the memories. The questions were deliberately open-ended and meant to stir discussion about the specific topics in each block. The focus group discussions were semi-structured and had the following blocks of questions, from which the full question blocks can be found in Appendix A:

Block 1: Establishing social media behavior, habits and preferences

Block 2: Bring back to the event (outage situation)

Block 3: Feeling - How did they feel; how did it affect them

Block 4: Coping mechanism - how did they cope

Block 5: Concrete organizations

Data analysis plan

In line with this study's theoretical framework and its focus on social acceleration and the uses & gratifications theory, content analysis was the main approach toward analysing the data in a systematic way, as suggested by Wilkinson (2004, pg. 182). A qualitative analysis approach was used to examine the results of the focus group discussions. This is because the data was collected through focus group discussions, where unique characteristics such as group dynamics and individual participants' utterances could be observed, coded, and analysed. The use of a content analysis approach means that the data is analysed for certain keywords and phrases, as well as interactions among and between participants. This analysis is then coded into certain themes in which a thematic analysis is conducted to categorise certain characteristics and behavioural patterns that were detected within the groups. This second thematic analysis is then connected back to the theoretical framework in order to establish the relevance of the theories and apply them to the study. In practice, this means that concepts pertaining to social media usage were uncovered, and any observations that could be concluded from the participants' descriptions of their experiences were described. These answers were then linked to both theories and real-world scenarios in order to illustrate the tangible academic and corporate value of the research.

Validity and reliability

The aim of social science is to produce descriptions of a social world (Peräkylä, 2005), which means that the *objectivity* and *credibility* of social scientific research are at stake (Kirk & Miller, 1985). Therefore, the criteria of validity and reliability are important. However, Bryman (2016) stated that these criteria may not be as relevant for qualitative research as they are for quantitative research.

With this in mind, this qualitative study follows Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria to establish *trustworthiness* for evaluating qualitative research: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. These criteria were created because Lincoln and Guba opposed the notion there must be absolute truths about the social world that the social scientist must uncover, where instead there *can* be more than one account (Bryman, 2016).

In the context of this study, the researcher noted that while it is not difficult to investigate the social media uses and behavior of university students, the utilization of a technological outage as an empirical phenomenon does not happen often, and therefore it becomes a very enriching scenario to credibly explore the cultural underpinnings which motivate university students' use of social media, boosting *credibility*. The *transferability* of the study is determined by the amount of information available by the researcher in order for the study to be replicated, and the recommended way is to produce a thick description, as mentioned by Lynch (2003) above. *Dependability* refers to the extent to which readers are able to follow the process of the study and can therefore rely on the results to be accurate and thus dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, *confirmability* is used to show the researcher acted in good faith; that is, personal values or theoretical inclinations did not overly influence the research and its findings (Bryman, 2016).

Reflexivity statement

In this study, the researcher identified as an international student of Lund University and a moderately active user of social media. His role in the research has had minimal influence on

the thesis because he was genuinely interested in exploring if there were coping mechanisms that university students utilised when social network sites were no longer available. And to uncover if there were any non-Meta social network sites that were used. These concerns were addressed through the use of impartial, open-ended questions in the interview guide that sought to uncover genuine answers.

Ethical considerations

As for ethical considerations, all risks for participants in this study were minimised. The names of participants will not be disclosed to ensure privacy and confidentiality so that participants will not be identified. Consent forms were given to participants prior to participating in the focus groups to provide their informed consent, which they signed. Through these forms, participants knew their participation was voluntary, they had the freedom to withdraw from the study and their data would be confidential and would be treated only for the purposes of the study. For the discussion of results, anonymous names were used. During the focus group discussions, a smartphone was used to record the discussions in video format. This recording was only made available to the researcher for viewing and transcribing, which includes coding and analysis of data. At any time during and after the discussions, participants had the right to pull out of the research project. This means that the recorded portion of the specific participant would not be transcribed, coded, or analysed.

Another ethical issue was the allocation of participants into focus groups by means of purposive sampling. The researcher acknowledged this would potentially decrease the objectivity of the data and the results that could be collected. However, the researcher found that this was a necessary compromise needed to extract the most useful data from the participants and therefore admitted this as an ethical issue.

5. Results and Analysis

The empirical analysis is presented in this chapter for the purposes of answering the two research questions developed for the study. The results of the focus groups will be described and this is followed by a thematic analysis in connection with the thesis study. The analysis examines the phenomenon from the perspective of university students in terms of their experience of the outage, the importance they place on social media, and their thoughts on the non-Meta SNSs they use to maintain communicative availability. This analysis chapter addresses each research question at a time to allow explicit answers that contribute to a meaningful understanding of the problem of the study.

An interview guide was developed for the purposes of answering each research question, and more topics pertaining to the thesis topic were developed spontaneously during each discussion. This means that the results and corresponding analysis are expansive of the research questions and explore the phenomenon from multiple angles and perspectives, providing the reader with a thorough and objective view of the phenomenon.

5.1 RQ1: The extensive technological outage of October 4th, 2021

How did university students experience the technological outage?

In the first question, the aim was to learn about the university students' experiences in the outage. Their reactions and the actions they took would give an indication of how they think of social media and any importance they assign to it. Thus, the analysis of the results of this question is split into three parts to differentiate participants based on their level of active usage.

5.1.1 The university students who were emotionally affected by it

The first section is about individuals who were affected by the outage due to their usage of social media and felt negative or non-positive emotions associated with the incident. This is because they either use social network sites very frequently or SNSs are the medium in which they contact the people they most actively communicate with based on their preferred modes of

communication. Being emotionally affected shaped their experiences, their view of the outage and their coping mechanisms which are addressed in the next research question.

Participant Isra from Focus Group 1 uses SNSs very frequently, and she described her feelings during the outage as those of annoyance, anger, sadness, and loneliness. These feelings happened at various intervals during the outage. For instance, she felt annoyed and angry at the beginning when the outage began, because she was having text conversations on Instagram and noticed the messages were not delivered. She then checked WhatsApp and realised the same issue was happening. Her first conclusion was that her smartphone was having technical or connectivity issues, so her first course of action was to delete the applications and re-download them, hoping it would restore the SNS services on her smartphone. Unfortunately for her, this did not work. Isra also said she had scheduled to meet a friend for dinner, but due to the outage, she was unable to communicate with her friend and was not sure what to do and whether the meeting would still proceed.

Isra mentioned that because she could not communicate via WhatsApp, she was not able to call her mother using WhatsApp's calling function. At that time of the outage, she did not have a local mobile subscription in Sweden that enabled international calls, and therefore she could not reach out to her mother. In the end, Isra said that her mother "sent her an email", which is a form of asynchronous communication, and she continued the conversation with her mother by exchanging emails back and forth. As Isra stated, she does not normally contact her mother via email but it was the only feasible form of communication at that time. Towards the end of the incident, she experienced feelings of sadness and loneliness because she could not reach her friends, and it was the time of the day when she would most typically have conversations with her social circles from home.

Participant Fitri from Focus Group 2 claims that she "uses different social media for specific purposes" and slowly but briefly elaborated on each one, including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. In describing her experience of the outage, she mentioned feeling "funny" because she has a close friend with whom she communicates regularly on social media, but whose real name she does not know. Therefore she could not personally reach out to this

friend offline since she would not know what to call her. This happens when a person with a Chinese name creates a nickname in English and uses this English name on social media, thus masking their Chinese identity. In recounting the “funny” emotion, Fitri described it as the feeling when you know a person for a long time and in the end, you realise that you do not know their actual name. In this context, Fitri was emotionally affected by the outage because she felt bad not knowing the real name of her friend.

In her recollection of some events leading to the outage and during the outage, Fitri stated that she and her group of friends were upset as they were trying to plan a party but could not do so because it was difficult to confirm the guests’ attendance via WhatsApp. According to her, “we were stuck in the thought that WhatsApp is the only tool that we forgot we could make a call or send SMS.” In the end, the party had to be canceled since they could not get confirmation from the attendees. Furthermore, Fitri was also trying to organise separately a trip with her friends and she was surprised, during the outage, at being unable to contact her friends. For instance, she only knows the person’s WhatsApp number, and when she tried to make a cellular phone call (because of the outage), she could not reach the person “because apparently some of them use different numbers between the regular channel and WhatsApp - they use their country number on WhatsApp and I didn’t have their Swedish number”.

5.1.2 The ones who were happy to stay away from social media

In this next section, these are individuals who felt a sense of relief to be given the opportunity to take a break from the affected SNSs, either because they could not keep up with it or they felt a general sense of overwhelm from it. Although the outage prevented them from sending messages or contacting some people, they took the extra time as a chance to give undivided attention to their neighbors or the friends they were already with.

Participant Elaine from Focus Group 1 had been anxious because she needed to make contact with a few individuals that evening and the outage prevented the communication from happening. Initially, she felt anxious due to the numerous things that were happening to her at that time which was beyond her control and this made her feel annoyed at the inconvenience.

She had to buy something from someone, meet a friend for dinner and tried to send a voice message to another person. However, none of the messages could be communicated to the recipients. As a result, she said that “nobody replied and no one showed up”. When she finally met her friends, they said they tried to text her too but could not reach her. Sometime later, however, Elaine admitted to “feeling peaceful” because she noticed she did not feel worried if people replied to her messages or not and decided to “enjoy the moment” instead. For her, the disability of communication services meant that the ability to coordinate meetings was missing. Otherwise, there was generally no other essential need for her to use social media.

Participant Steven from Focus Group 1 echoed a similar overall response, although his situation was different. He realised SNSs were not working only because he was cooking dinner in his student housing when his neighbors told him that Instagram was not working. If no one had informed him about the outage, he claimed that he would have discovered it himself eventually. Thus, the outage was “not a big deal” for him. He also used another application that is not connected to Facebook, so he could maintain communication with people regardless. When asked to elaborate on which application(s), he specified “Telegram and Signal” as the other platforms.

Participant Deniz from Focus Group 2 described his overall feeling as “quite good”. He said that “Facebook, Instagram having an outage didn’t affect my life in any sort of bad way because I had alternatives. Yeah, Twitter and LinkedIn worked.” He admitted that he “panicked” in the first hour, and he calmed down after he learned what was happening. Deniz uses a mixture of SNSs both for his social and professional lives where for example there are groups on Facebook belonging to his workplace that he is involved in, and he also uses Facebook for regular social life. He also uses Twitter and LinkedIn, the latter for his professional network. Otherwise, Deniz described the outage as “peaceful and nice” that they did not have social media for a few hours. The outage made him aware that there was “more to life than social media”. He believed that if someone needed to reach you, they “would find a way to reach you regardless of the situation”.

5.1.3 Those who were indifferent towards it

In this third section, the focus is on the individuals who were nonchalant towards the outage of the affected social network sites. This means the presence or absence of the SNSs in question did not affect them in any way. Even if it did, it was treated only as a temporary inconvenience and subsequently shrugged off. Their indifference towards the outage indicates their view towards social media, which they see as a tool for communication but they derive no particular gratification from it.

Participant Elin from Focus Group 1 stated that she noticed Instagram and WhatsApp were not working, but she had to check them multiple times and eventually be told verbally by a friend that both services had crashed before she realised what was happening. Despite this, she felt fine with the situation and was neither happy nor upset about it. Even if no one had told her, she claims she would have checked on Google by herself and found out in the end. In her use of Facebook and Instagram, she stated she “does not really get a meaningful experience with them. Also, I do not really use them to communicate with a lot of people. It is more like just scrolling stuff. I did not really feel like it was important”. However, she said she does use Facebook Messenger, but “I am not really great at communicating”.

In specifying her emotions at the beginning of the outage, Elin described it as “brief confusion” as she wondered why the SNSs were not working, but afterward things were normal for her. In her words, “it was more about the awareness of the situation - when I found out, it was a big relief”. Elin’s experience of the outage was that she had planned to meet a friend already and he just showed up as scheduled. She did not have to worry about the lack of communication. Even if her friend did not arrive, Elin would have done other things.

Participant Jessica from Focus Group 1 had a similar experience. She noticed the SNSs were not working and her first thought was the Wi-Fi Internet connectivity in her apartment was not functioning properly. It was not until someone told her - via WhatsApp - that Instagram had crashed that she realised the problem. This meant there was a domino effect happening in the outage; WhatsApp was still working minutes after Instagram was down, and because both services are Facebook-owned, WhatsApp inevitably crashed too. When asked about her

emotions throughout, Jessica stated she was “quite neutral” about it. In elaborating on her response, she said “it was not a life-threatening event”. This echoed Elin’s response that she noticed it and would “just do something else instead as it was not a big deal”.

Participant Leon from Focus Group 1 had similar sentiments that the outage did not bother him. The social network site that Leon uses the most is WeChat, because he comes from China, and WeChat did not experience an outage. Leon explained that although he uses Meta-owned SNSs too, it is WeChat where his daily communication takes place, especially with his family. However, he also elaborated that “no one reaches out to me through social media”, indicating that he does not communicate much with his social circles, and if he does, it would be mainly through WeChat. Similarly, Leon did not feel bothered by the outage when it happened, and said “even if there would be a life-threatening situation, it would be difficult to connect with others on social media”. He also said he simply figured out at some point that WhatsApp and Instagram had stopped working. Leon concluded there was only one previous occasion where he felt negative emotions due to an outage. This happened when he lost access to one of his corporate email accounts from which he needed to write to his colleague but could not do it because he had lost access to the account and to important information contained within. Thus, he had a “panicky moment” back then.

Participant Samantha from Focus Group 2 said she “remembers hearing about the blackout after it happened, but I didn’t have any experience of it myself.” She was generally unaware of the outage and only found out about it the day after. She was surprised when she learned about it but was not “overly concerned”. In describing her emotions, she said it felt “strange and weird” that it happened, but it was not going to make her, for instance, change power companies or electrical companies, presuming that the outage was due to a disruption in her home Wi-Fi connection.

Participant Samuel from Focus Group 2 remembered the outage “extremely clearly”. He was supposed to meet someone and was messaging with them, but realised it “kind of wasn’t going through”. His first thought was he “should definitely have this person on a different platform rather than just WhatsApp”, and he echoed a similar experience as Fitri in that the

phone details “were a different number to what the phone number is here in Sweden”. When Samuel checked online and found out it was a power outage for Facebook, he was rational about it and just left it for a while. After the outage, he said, “I figured, from that point onwards, it’s probably a good idea to get rid of WhatsApp or Facebook”. He admitted he still uses it, but it is a process, because “there are people in my life that only have those things, so I can only contact them and I value them. So I’m kind of stuck between them. Transitioning to others.”

Participant Mahmoud from Focus Group 2 was largely nonchalant emotionally about it, but he admitted to being “curious” about the outage - “I was interested about it from a technical aspect. I was trying to understand why it happened, and I remember I spent some minutes trying to understand what happened, but I think it is also a reflection of what we call a social media outage and still be on social media. It’s a Facebook outage. It’s like Facebook is a monopoly and they have Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger.” Mahmoud said he personally does not use WhatsApp much because “when you’re connected, it says that you’re online and you can’t hide that. It gives the impression that you’re very accessible. So I stopped using it and it didn’t affect my life.”

5.2 RQ2: Coping mechanisms that university students used

How did university students cope during the outage of Meta-owned social network sites and which non-Meta social network sites did they use?

In this second question, the aim was to learn the coping strategies that university used during the outage, and if they did use non-Meta social network sites, to identify those SNSs.

5.2.1 They coped by using non-Meta SNSs or other communication channels

When she was dealing with the inability to communicate via social network sites, Isra received an email from her mother asking how she was doing, and this began a series of email exchanges between her and her mother. In Isra’s words, “it is not because we regularly send emails to each other but it seemed like the only way to communicate at that time”. Besides

emailing her mother, she also used Twitter to check the news and find out more information about the situation. It was also only during the focus group that Isra realised she has Telegram too, although she does not use it. Thus, her other communication channels were Twitter and e-mail. On the other hand, Leon said that his main social network was WeChat. He also mentioned that he is not very active on social media and “no one is reaching out to me through social media, so eventually I would not be bothered.”

For Mahmoud, he turned to iMessage on his iPhone - a communication tool between iPhones - as an alternative mode of communication. Mahmoud said his most important contact to him is his sister. They live in different cities and she lives away from home as well, so “we’re in daily contact.” In response to a question on whether iMessage is an “Apple thing”, Mahmoud acknowledged that “we’re (he and his sister) Apple slaves”. In addition to iMessage, he also searched and read the news about the outage on Google to find out what happened. For Deniz, “nothing crucial” happened during the outage. He was trying to meet someone, but they realised they could not reach each other on WhatsApp. So they decided to message each other on LinkedIn and it solved their communication problem. When the outage occurred, he was still able to communicate with his friends through LinkedIn. And if the world truly went offline and he needed to contact someone, the last option would be to mail a letter by postbox.

The use of SMS-based texting was acknowledged by the participants of Focus Group 1 as a possible form of communication, but they generally do not use it. Leon considers SMS texting as a channel for “formal things or more like for problem-solving”. Isra echoed this view, saying “it is the last choice not preferred by me - it is more like a backup plan”. Jessica uses SMS “mostly at home” but uses WhatsApp more “because everyone is using WhatsApp here in Sweden.” However, assuming that WhatsApp is not working, she would use SMS to communicate. Elaine thinks SMS is “to get informed about technical things - like a message you receive when you need to renew your password or when you get a code to access a website”.

5.2.2 No coping mechanism in particular

As for Elaine, she did not do anything special to cope with the situation. She had been speaking to a female friend who also said that she had to send an email to her boyfriend at that time. After going through half of the outage and being inconvenienced by it, it was already late in the evening and Elaine decided to fall asleep. When she woke up in the middle of the night, she checked that all communication services had been restored and she could once again send and receive messages online.

For Steven, besides turning to Telegram, he had no other coping mechanism in particular. Even if there were no communication with others for a few hours or even a few days, he would not have a major problem with it. If his friends sent him messages, he would just “reply to the messages after a couple of days and it would be fine”. He thinks that one can just “wait a few hours” when an outage happens and just “continue what you were doing”. Steven noted that this is “how we got used to it”, because in today’s social media world, when you text someone you would usually wait for the reply immediately, but said, “it doesn’t have to work like that.” There were also other communication services besides Meta-owned SNSs where communication is still possible if there was an urgent need.

For Fitri, she used regular phone calls as per normal during the outage. She said it is personally “something I really like to be honest because it’s quite authentic in my opinion”. However, this method did not go down too well with her friends: “but apparently a lot of friends, it’s real, that sometimes they complain. Why are you calling me? Just text me.” To which Mahmoud replied “I’m one of them”. Fitri admitted she normally would not use phone calls unless it is a special scenario, depending on the importance of the situation. During the outage specifically, she only made one or two phone calls to check on the whereabouts of her contacts. Otherwise, if it is not urgent, she would not call.

5.2.3 No effect as they do not use those social media in general

The individuals that fell under this category had arguably the least amount of text for their answers since they are not active users of social media. The outage did not have a significant impact on them and therefore there were not many changes to their behavior. For

instance, Jessica only noticed that Instagram was not working, and she checked WhatsApp briefly to obtain some information before it became unavailable as well. Otherwise, nothing in particular disturbed her. As for Elin, she “really did not need to cope” and it was “more about the awareness of the situation.” Lastly, Samuel said that he used email to send an email to his partner. And he also considered whether to use Skype.

Samantha said that personally, she did not really have an issue since she has low activity on social media. But if she had to contact somebody, she said “it’s different for each individual. I would have to physically go to where they are, like where they live to get in contact with them. A lot of people reach (out) over email, or other social applications, like LinkedIn. If those were down, I probably LinkedIn would be the one I go to, but it really depends on the person. I think each individual has their own preference for the media.”

5.3 Further Results

After having developed answers directed toward the research questions, the interview guide was structured to purposefully steer the discussion away from the individual experience of the outage and towards the topic on the use of social media for strategic communication, particularly within the domain of customer service and the adoption of social network sites to establish customer management channels which would facilitate queries, feedback, and complaints. There were also answers that put into perspective the development of social acceleration aided by technical acceleration and how it is today compared to many years ago. The results of these answers are analysed afterward.

5.3.1 Digitalised communication of today

In describing her use of digital technology, Elin recounted and lamented her experience with using a chatbot for an airline. “I was trying to cancel the ticket and it just kept me in the chatbot section and then I kept asking the question that they did not have the answer and then there is no option to fix it. And there was no option to contact. There was no email or phone number listed.” When asked how she would resolve it if the chatbox could not provide an answer

and she could not find a real person to talk to, Elin said “I would give up. I lost some time and money but that’s life. Let’s move on. I am already too stressed about other things too.” Isra also mentioned her experience with an airline company, where “if you want to call them to contact you have to wait up to 1 hour to reach someone”, and to reduce the load on their phone lines, they “were offering an alternative WhatsApp channel, where you can use this service to change your tickets or rebook another flight”.

For Mahmoud the outage made him think back about “how digitalised our communication is”. He recalled in his youth that “you would give a person an appointment and then you just show up at a landmark and go there like 10 minutes before” since they did not have mobile phones. And if the person “did not show up, the maximum you could do was that you find a phone nearby, called the home and asked the mother if they left. And you just keep waiting patiently”. For Leon, he described his observation of the effect of the outage succinctly: “when you use these certain social media platforms on a daily basis, then you suddenly understand that it is not working - you put all the important information there, such as your contacts - so we are run by social media (as) it shapes us in a way that you cannot live without them”.

5.3.2 Adapting to the situation

Deniz mentioned the importance of adapting to the situation. That it depends on an individual’s specific needs at the time of the outage and that they would have to adapt to whatever means necessary to communicate with their intended contact person. Deniz further elaborated on the limitations on who our contact person may be. Someone who lives in the EU will easily be able to make a cellular phone call to another person within the EU. But to reach someone who lives outside the EU by the same method will be a bit more costly. For this, he suggested using email instead. When asked how many days he could survive without using communication services, Deniz replied “First 24 hours, easy”. For Samuel, without Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, he could “definitely do it. I would just find another way. If it’s all communication, including phone and e-mails, that is a little bit of a problem.”

5.4 Analysis of the Results

An analysis of the results suggests some conclusions that may be of interest to scholars. For instance, technical acceleration has enabled social media which allows people to do multiple things at the same time, synchronously and asynchronously, regardless of location. This increases the pace of life at which people operate because the human brain recognises it as multiple activities taking place within the same timeframe. This is evident in Elaine's experience, for example, where she was communicating separately to three different people at the same time for different purposes. The fact that this series of activities could take place is a result of the acceleration of the pace of life because the speed at which these activities could be carried out was essentially compressed.

Furthermore, when the outage happened, this technical acceleration was forced to come to a stop. It became social deceleration, and Elaine had to make do with the abrupt halt. Another important observation to note is that even after she fell asleep during the outage, her first instinct when she awoke at night was to check social media *again* as she wanted to see whether communication services had resumed. From a theoretical perspective, this reaction is a real life description of Rosa's definition of the acceleration of the pace of life, where subjectively, the person feels a lack of time, is pressed for time or is anxious about "not keeping up" (Rosa, 2013, pg. 79). This also connects theoretically to Rosa's slipping slopes concept of "*If you aren't climbing up, you're climbing down.*" (ibid). In this case, because the outage lasted several hours and Elaine was not in tune with any conversation on social media, she felt a need to keep up and get on with the world again as soon as she could. This reaction can also be interpreted as a consequence of both the acceleration of social change and the uses & gratifications theory because the young human brain today has been wired to constantly monitor social media. So even though the outage was happening when Elaine fell asleep, she still had a subconscious urge to check social media when she woke up, presumably with the hope that the SNSs were back online.

For Isra and Samuel, email was their choice of communication tool that they used during the outage to contact another person. This was because email serves as a one-to-one

communication channel. Isra had also used Twitter, but it was for the purposes of checking news updates on the outage. This line of thinking was reiterated by Deniz, who suggested the use of email. Towards the end of the focus group, Isra stated that she knew she was “already addicted to social media but at that time, I personally found out that I was even obsessed with it”, admitting that it would have been a peak period of usage for her during the specific timeframe in which the outage occurred. She confirmed this by saying “I think it was also because of the time when it happened (sic) like if I was at school or another important place at that time I would not be bothered but at that time I am mainly supposed to make calls to home, to my friends.”

These descriptions shine a spotlight on the communicative needs of university students and the importance of SNSs in facilitating these needs. It also speaks of a tendency for university students to be unaware of their level of addiction with SNSs, simply because technical acceleration has allowed synchronous communication technologies to be possible. Circling back to the theoretical framework, Lull (1980) established a typology of the social uses of television as a structural gratification of sorts, meaning it was just there in the background as an environmental resource. Television was used as a companion when doing an activity as people would leave the television running in the background to contribute to the overall social environment (pg. 202).

Based on these results, the same can be said of social media for university students today, where social media provides university students with the feeling of being connected even if they are not looking at their phone. It keeps them in the loop without having to be focused on it all the time. This structural gratification, so as to speak, of SNSs today is for university students what television was for households back then. SNSs are simply there as structural affordances, just like television. Therefore, when the outage occurred, it was immediately noticeable because it was no longer running in the background. It is helpful to note that Mahmoud uses iMessage actively since it is a tool that still exists for Apple-owned devices. It was also suggested by Deniz and Samantha separately that because LinkedIn is a social network site, they would also consider using it if the Meta-owned SNSs were offline.

For the rest of the focus group participants who did not experience negative emotions throughout or as a result of the outage, theoretically it shows that social deceleration was actually appreciated by these people, and it can be observed that not everyone is interested in constantly keeping up with the pace of life. For these individuals, the concept of Rosa's (2013) "slipping slopes" does not apply to them.

In addition to the thematic categories that emerged as a result of the question blocks intended to answer the research questions, there were other answers that were still relevant to the overall topic being discussed. For instance, Fitri mentioned that she used Twitter only once previously, and it was an occasion when she heard that if you made a complaint to an airline via Twitter, you could get a "fast response", which is exactly what she had experienced and received. This answer prompted queries from another participant who wanted to find out the name of the airline so they could use the same tactic. Elin's experience, however, painted a different story, as she could not resolve her problem using the airline's website chatbot function. An assumption can be made here that a conversation with Fitri on this specific issue could have gone longer if Elin was in the same group because Elin had a similar airline issue, but instead of using Twitter to resolve it, she went via the website chatbot function.

Mahmoud's recollection of the state of communication in his youth compared to today also speaks volumes on the progress of technical acceleration over recent years and the way this has shaped human nature today, particularly among university students. As he is in his mid-30s, Mahmoud can be considered to be at the tail-end of the millennial age group which puts him among a small group of people who have witnessed the advancement of technology and have personally seen the changes it has made in people in terms of social behaviors and communication patterns. In a similar vein, Leon echoed this sentiment through his understanding of the amount of reliance that people today place on social media, simply by virtue of the amount of information we choose to keep on social media. This reflects current research on social media that describes the business of social network sites as an "attention economy" (Twenge et al., 2019) - most of our information is stored in the SNSs, and therefore it is difficult to live without them.

The focus group results indicate that university students are fully aware of the social network services available to them and the range of communication tools that are at their disposal. Their use of specific SNSs is based on their preferences, the communication preferences of their social circles, and their own personalities. For example, this is evident in Leon's situation. As he comes from China, his main social network is WeChat, which is not a Meta-owned SNS. Furthermore, he does not interact much socially, thus further lowering the negative impact that the outage had on his social life. University students are also aware of the need to adapt to unique situations, although they admit there is a limit to the number of changes they would be willing to accept. If it's a short-term outage of some SNSs, the general consensus is that they could tolerate it for about 24 hours. Thus, these minor differences can play a big role in university students' perception of social media and their unique coping strategies in the event of social deceleration.

The results of the analysis from these focus groups are derived from university students. These university students comprise a large part of online audiences who contribute significantly to the digital economy. Therefore, they form an important segment of digital consumers and communicators have to understand their behavioural patterns so as to be able to strategically engage and communicate with them.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter of the thesis is where final discussions based on the findings from the results can be drawn. It begins with a discussion of the various parts of the study and connects it to the topic, noting the findings from the results within the scope of strategic communication. The chapter concludes with implied answers to the research questions proposed and suggestions on the direction that future research should follow. It ends with some thoughts for scholars with the aim to encourage curiosity and to foster research interest in the field of the uses and gratifications theory.

6.1 Comprehensive Discussion and Knowledge Contribution

Based on the findings of the results, several discussion points can be raised and contribute to current knowledge regarding university students and the communicative use of social media. It can be said that university students put great attention to the digital communication channels afforded by social media due to the fact that they were raised around digital technology, which gives rise to the plethora of social network sites that we know today. The data has shown that university students are aware of asynchronous communication tools such as SMS-texting, emails, and phone calls and do know how to use them. It just happens that in everyday settings, these tools are not used as often anymore, because of the accessibility afforded by technical acceleration and social media.

The social acceleration that has occurred has meant that university students are sometimes so caught up with the accelerated pace of life that it actually becomes normal to be constantly connected to others. With this accelerated pace of life, university students subconsciously have an expectation to be part of an ongoing synchronous conversation all the time, or at least have the choice to jump into a synchronous conversation at their convenience. This reinforces the theoretical connection to the structural use of social media, that “it’s just there”, much like how television used to be “just there” for households. Social network sites are therefore not only tools where they simply contact their friends when they feel a need for it.

There are also other ongoing conversations they are handling while living their lives in the real world.

Now that we have learned these insights about university students and their communication behavior, therein lies the importance of this study for strategic communication. Following this train of thought, let us switch perspectives and step into the shoes of a small business owner who relies on Meta-owned SNSs for business. If university students want to complain about a business, it is more likely that they would utilise social media to air their views instead of visiting the website to fill out a complaints form, because this feels a lot slower and it also breaks their natural rhythm of interaction. In a similar vein, communicators can use this outage as a trigger to think more seriously about strategic communication and to leverage non-Meta SNSs when needed.

This brings me to my next point. Communicators need to understand that university students are in a constant ongoing conversation with the world around them, with several conversations happening all the time. SNSs hold these ongoing conversations for them in the background, acting as a structured form of social use whenever they want it. When these conversations are interrupted, they do experience feelings of discomfort and disorientation due to the disconnect. It is this embeddedness of Facebook in people's lives that has to be acknowledged and understood so that communicators are able to react accordingly if faced when an outage like that again. It is generally in the best interest of communicators to make available multiple channels of communication for their customers. Some tech-savvy organisations have also attempted to set up the chatbot function on their websites where customers can interact with a robot and receive automated answers to their queries. This unfortunately does not work out on certain occasions, as seen with Elin's example above, when it comes to information that cannot be found in the database.

The industry in which communicators operate in can also determine which SNSs they have to use. For example, in the aviation industry, airlines are seen as organisations that have to have a presence on Twitter and develop it into a major customer complaint management channel. As Fitri mentioned in Focus Group 2, Twitter has become known as the best communication

channel to reach an airline's customer service representative, and she personally used it to resolve her inquiries as a customer, which worked out for her. Conversely, Elin in Focus Group 1 described her difficulty in reaching the airline's customer service, stating that her use of the chatbot function on the airline's website did not work out. In this specific scenario, university students have developed the expectation that if they encounter problems in their travel itinerary or wish to lodge a complaint with the airline, one efficient way to do this is through Twitter. Hence, airlines that are not already on Twitter have to consider creating one as a way to resolve their customer feedback in a timely manner (Gilbertson, 2022). Furthermore, being active on SNSs not only allows customers to reach them quickly, but it is also advantageous for communicators because they will also be able to observe customer feedback and discussions on social media. Whether someone is complaining about them or giving feedback, communicators can spot these signs and direct them to contact the customer service representative.

6.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to investigate the empirical phenomenon of the outage of Meta-owned social network sites, which led to the formation of the two research questions. The first was the university students' experience of the outage, and the answers to these were varied. University students have their individual personalities that determine the thoughts they felt and these led to the actions they took. Based on their personalities, their experiences of the outage could be summarised in three categories: (1) *emotionally affected by it*, (2) *sense of relief*, and (3) *indifference and neutrality*. These categories are by no means strictly distinct and there may be an overlap, depending on the individual. The individual's emotions may fall into a certain category, but the actions they took could put them into another category.

For example, at the start of the outage, an individual might feel emotional about it, but after a few hours, this person subsequently felt relieved to have the opportunity to take a break from social media. However, the data still serves as a telling sign to know how today's university students think and operate in the highly interconnected world of social media, and their different perspectives on social media. Some see it as a means to an end; if social media is removed or otherwise unavailable, it becomes a moment of distress and will evoke negative emotions. Others

see it merely as a tool to communicate with convenience; if social media is taken away, it does not affect their behavior and perhaps only slightly impacts their communication patterns.

At the end of the day, university students are aware of the benefits and advantages that social media brings to them and how it impacts the way we live. Since the 2010s, email has quickly become an “old” technology in terms of communication (Dyrud, 2011). This is a stark difference from many years ago when social media comprised asynchronous communication tools and when Mahmoud referred to traditional channels of communication which were commonplace, such as writing a letter or using the telephone. The theory of social acceleration, especially technical acceleration, has enabled this massive acceleration where synchronous communication is now largely taken for granted and where university students have an expectation to always be available to their social circles whenever possible. This outage resulted in the sudden stoppage of Meta-owned SNSs and served as a timely reminder of the independence that society has placed on SNSs. In addition, this deceleration gave contextual emphasis to the concept of slipping slopes, which is the scenario where if one is not keeping up with the pace of life with the rest of the world, it feels as if one is falling behind. This is because when things came to an abrupt standstill, some university students felt that things were falling apart and out of their control because they could not get back into synchronous communication through Meta-owned SNSs.

The second research question aimed to investigate the coping mechanisms of university students. This was to uncover the actions that university students resorted to in the event of forced social deceleration and how differently university students reacted and behaved based on their personalities. It was also intended to uncover the non-Meta SNSs that they would turn to in the event of an outage. In this instance, the study was concerned with revealing the underlying social psychology of their actions. With the data, it is observed that university students were split in their coping mechanisms. While some were in a negative state of mind, confused and perplexed, others were nonchalant and calm. As for the non-Meta SNSs that were used, they were Twitter, LinkedIn and Telegram. This informs communicators that people do experience some form of discomfort or disorientation, and even though the conversations on Meta-owned

platforms were interrupted, these did not stop people from still being in constant ongoing conversations.

Another point to note is that this small sub-section of digital natives experienced this outage while being in Sweden when it was in the late evening hours, which means there was little urgent need for university students to communicate with each other for academic purposes. Based on this unusual occurrence, it can be deduced that in other countries such as the Americas where it would have been in the afternoon, it should have been a much bigger problem, as Deniz suggested that it depends on the individual's specific needs at the time of the outage. This is because people needed to interact with each other during the day, and this would have caused much more negative emotions. The coping mechanisms may have been identical as the data here shows, but the level of panic could have been worse. This brings the question of how communicators can understand this fact strategically. It can be argued that the solution lies in asynchronous communication tools such as email or the website. However, university students prefer to use SNSs for various communicative activities, which fall in the category of synchronous communication. Hence, the derived answers of the second research question are aimed at starting a subsequent discussion about strategic engagement through social media.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

This study is important to expand the field of strategic communicative engagement with university students and there is an imperative need for communicators to understand university students' involvement in Meta-owned SNSs as well as the communication tools they use (Meredith, 2012). So this outage presents an opportunity to look into it with empirical data. This will allow communicators to have insights into the communicative activities that university students are embedded in, and adapt to their patterns of communication. Furthermore, the war events in Russia and Ukraine led to the blockage of Meta-owned SNSs in Russia (Bevan, 2022; Milmo, 2022), which changed the way Russians access SNSs. While the empirical study of a technological outage may seem like a trivial matter, a more pressing issue in the case of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine have led to the emergence of a slew of major problems, not just a strategic communication problem. Current research would not have taken into

consideration the effects of such unforeseen events that are not within the control of most people. However, since the war happened much more recently compared to the outage, this thesis has focused on the outage.

This thesis on the topic of communicative deceleration in the event of an outage in the context of strategic communication has highlighted that it is important for communicators to have a sound communicative strategy in place that enables them to know which communication channels they can still use. It is especially relevant for communicators who are social media specialists to know how to navigate communication during outages, blockages, or blackouts. More research, therefore, needs to be done in this context, and researchers specialised in this field will need to explore the synergy of social network sites and delve into the psychological and sociological appeal of social media. Future research can also tangibly contribute to the literature on the uses and gratifications theory as it presents an intrinsic interest in the field of audience research and becomes increasingly relevant in the digital world of the 21st century.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Block 1: Establishing social media behavior, habits and preferences

- How would you describe your social media usage?
- Which social media do you usually use? How often do you usually use them?
- Do you use any other SNSs or have accounts on other SNSs?
- Where and how do you usually get your news?
- Determine and explicitly compare differences in usage and preferences among participants

Block 2: Bring back to the event (outage situation)

- Take me through to the events of 4th October 2021, tell me what happened
- Were you aware that the outage happened *when* it happened? What made you aware of it?
- What were you doing when it occurred that made you realize something was unusual/amiss/wrong?

Block 3: Feeling - How did they feel; how did it affect them

- How did you feel when FB, IG and WA were not updating new messages or content?
- What were your first thoughts or reactions when you realized the Internet “as you know it” was down?
- What did you do when this happened?

Block 4: Coping mechanism - how did they cope

- What did you do when you realized you could not access the news anymore from social media?
- During this period, if you were trying to talk to someone or find out more information, what was the first source of information you turned to?
- Did you feel that something was missing for a few hours? How so?

Block 5: Concrete organizations

- Could you still carry out essential activities e.g. make appointments, buy transport tickets on Skånetrafiken
- Were there any activities you wanted to do that could *still* be done?
- What alternative messaging services do you use?
- Why or why do you not use them more often?
- How do you think this outage affected organizations?

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

Lund University's International Students' experiences of the extensive technological outage on 4th October 2021 and their reactions towards it

This consent form is part of the process required for ethical treatment of participants in research. It should give you a basic idea of the research topic and your participatory involvement. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please ask.

Invitation to participate

The research is twofold. Firstly, it investigates how international students experienced the extensive technological outage of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp on 4th of October 2021. Secondly, the research focuses on their reactions during the outage, whether they used any alternative means of social networking sites or communication services, and their satisfaction with these alternatives.

Research purpose

The research paper looks at how international students cope with the unavailability of the most popular social networking sites in order to inform organizations of the imperative need to devise and implement social media strategies as part of their organizational strategic communication.

Research method

If you decide to participate, we will invite you to participate in a semi-structured in-depth focus group interview. For example, you will be grouped with 4 to 5 other students where you will be asked to discuss your individual experiences following the outage and how your feelings developed during that time. Your answers will be reported anonymously and analyzed together with data from other research participants within the focus group.

Benefit

By participating, you will contribute to a better understanding of how young adult digital natives today use social networking sites, their social media behavior and habits, the availability of alternative social media and the satisfaction levels of these alternative sites. This will help organizations learn and understand behavior patterns and implement it in their social media strategy.

Confidentiality - Anonymity - Security

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the

study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Voluntary participation

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications.

If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation or withdraw from participating, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researcher or Lund University.

Upon request, a copy of the information, data and results can and will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your participation will be destroyed without being used in the study.

If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What your signature means

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequence.

Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Signature of Participant

Date

Print Name

Signature of Researcher

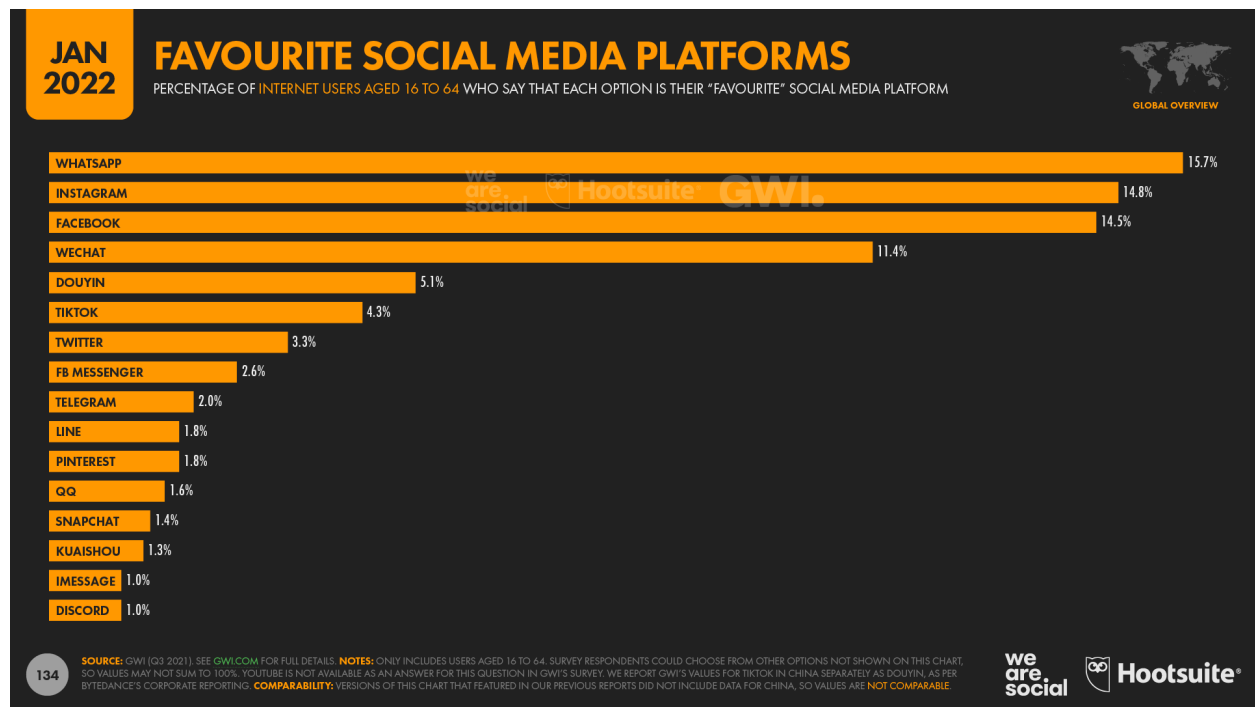
Date

Contact Information

Email: ji5274yu-s@student.lu.se

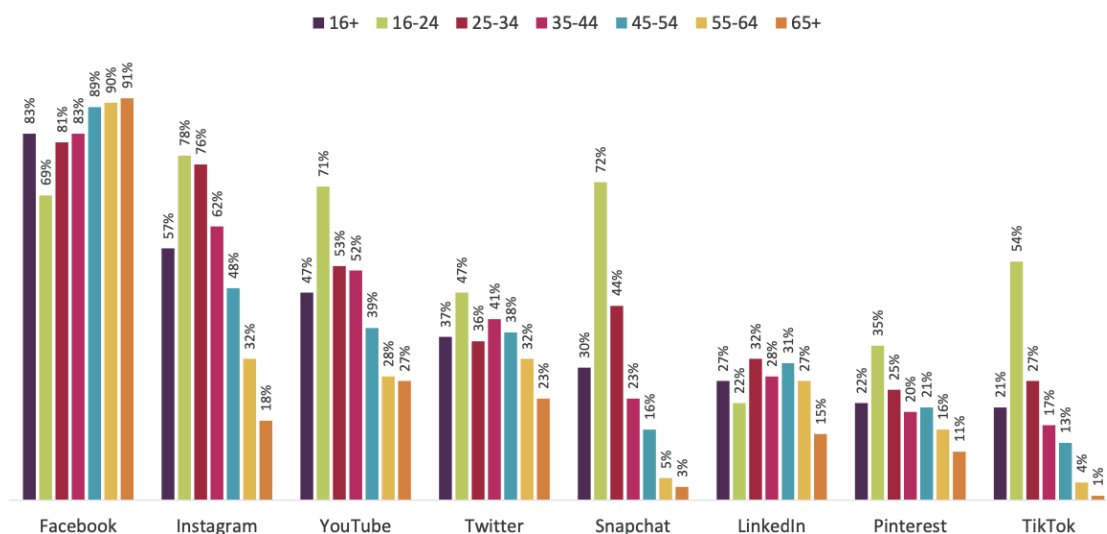
Best Regards,
Yue Jie

Appendix C



Appendix D

Figure 1.30: Use of social media sites or apps by social media users: 2020

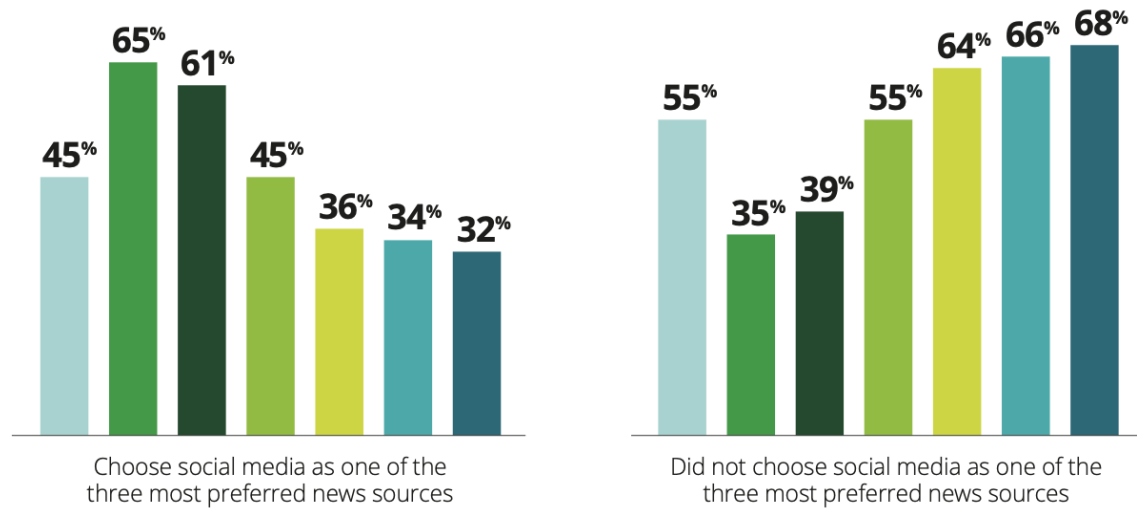


Source: Ofcom, Adults' Media Literacy Tracker 2020

Appendix E

Figure 20

Social media as one of the top three most preferred news sources

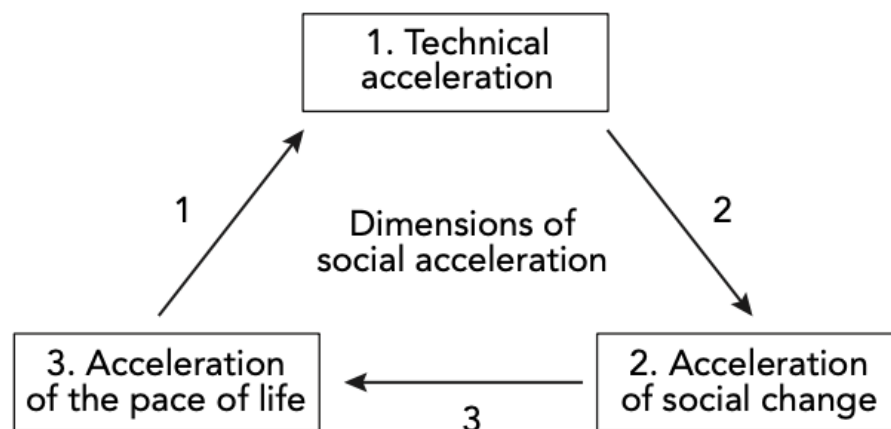


Legend: Total (light blue), 18-24 (green), 25-34 (dark green), 35-44 (light green), 45-54 (yellow-green), 55-64 (teal), 65-75 (dark teal)

Base 2021: All adults 18-75. Weighted base (4000), 18-24 (484), 25-34 (750), 35-44 (708), 45-54 (761), 55-64 (652), 65-75 (645).

Appendix F

Driving Forces of Acceleration I: The Circle of Acceleration



6.1. The Circle of Acceleration