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# UNIT 6 THEORIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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## **6.0 INTRODUCTION**

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Social media has become omnipresent in the present times. Almost everyone has become a user of social media today. Social media usage has blurred geographic, social, economic and cultural boundaries to a large extent. It is also being put to varied uses, ranging from being in touch with one's friends to pursuing one's hobbies or interests or even self-expression. These varied uses by social media users result in equally varied effects on different domains of everyday lives. To better understand social media's use, effects, and other aspects, it would be beneficial to look at some related theories. Theories explain the concepts or aspects which are difficult to understand. In fact, "Theories are general statements that summarise our understandings of the way the world works (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 11).» McQuail (2010) defines theory as a set of ideas that help us to understand a phenomenon, guide action or predict a consequence. Theories are «organised sets of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspects of human experience (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 11). The goal of theories in communication generally remains to understand the use of different media, the effects of media and the learning from the media (Severin & Tankard, 2001). Hence, theories related to social media would not only help us better understand its uses and effects but would also help us effectively use social media.

However, when we talk of theories in mass media, we need to keep in mind that theories in mass communication generally do not take the form of if-then statements as explanations of processes of mass communication usually do not have absolute propositions; rather, theories in mass communication take statements which explains the phenomenon with propositions like <more likely> or <greater the A, greater the B> statements (Severin & Tankard,

2001). Baran & Davis (2012) say that mass communication theories are ever-evolving owing to constant changes in media and society which use these media.

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## 6.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand different theories related to the use of social media; and
- Analyse the use or working of social media vis-a-vis social media theories;

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## 6.2 NETWORK THEORY

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The network theory traces its development to three threads of research traditions: sociometric analysis, interpersonal relations and structure of community relations (Liu, Sidhu, Beacom & Valente, 2017). All these traditions aim to understand how individuals in social networks get and process information right from the position of an individual in a social network to the closeness that an individual shares in various networks, which affects the acceptance and sharing of information. Gamper (2022) says that network analysis not only talks about personal attributes like age, gender, and income but also relational attributes like the position or status of actors in networks.

Homophily is an important aspect of social networks. Homophily is simply the similarity among individuals, which leads to connections (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). Homophilous characteristics among users establish connections. Two types of homophily can be noted: status homophily and value homophily (Gamper, 2022). Status homophily refers to similar characteristics like age, gender, income, and educational qualification, whereas value homophily means similarity in ways of thinking or attitudes. Homophilous relationships have higher chances of survival than non-homophilous relationships.

However, at the same time, we must consider that communication among homophilous bonds often restricts us to similar information, as all members share common attributes or interests. The members of homophilous groups would not usually allow new information to come in; hence, these groups tend to become strong-knit and close cliques. So, the concept that helps us understand the introduction of new information is the concept of weak ties compared to strong ties. The concept of 'weak ties' is discussed by Granovetter (1973) in his work 'The Strength of Weak Ties'. The concept of weak ties initiated an important discussion among network theories as weak ties aim to show the link between the groups of individuals and not within groups. The working of a group among its members is understood enough as all these members share strong ties, but how different groups that do not share strong bonds interact has not been studied much. Hence, defining the strength of a tie as a combination of contact intensity, intensity of emotions, intimacy and reciprocity among persons, Granovetter (1973) said that weak ties could reach more people. Strong ties would have high contact intensity, high emotional intensity, high intimacy and high reciprocity.

In contrast, weak ties would have low contact intensity, low emotional intensity, low intimacy and low reciprocity. However, weak ties are more likely to connect people from different small groups than strong ties (Gamper, 2022). Hence, weak ties would allow the exchange of more new information as people with different interests would come together, whereas strong ties would only reinforce the existing ideas. Family members and friends share strong ties, while acquaintances and colleagues share weak ties. The same concept can also be understood in terms of bridging social ties. Bonding happens in close relationships, whereas bridging occurs when individuals with few common interests come together for a common purpose. Both kinds of strong and weak were at work in society, but the spread of social media has given an even wider platform for these bonds to prosper.

Further, adding more understanding to the diffusion of new information, Burt (1987) notes that structural equivalence rather than cohesion is a stronger predictor of social contagion. Social contagion occurs when people who are socially proximate to each other can reduce the uncertainty of an innovation. Cohesion is defined as socialisation or social proximity, whereas structural equivalent people occupy the same position in the social structure and are proximate to the same patterns of relations. Structural equivalence overlaps, restricts, and extends the concept of cohesion. All these variables play an important role for media professionals as dissemination and diffusion of information need to be done while keeping in mind the effect of these variables on the acceptability of information by audiences. Social networks play an important role in all aspects of media work, whether it is the formation of public opinion or the success of marketing or advertising campaigns resulting in product buying (Liu, Sidhu, Beacom & Valente, 2017).

In fact, with the rise of digital media or social media, a research method called Network analysis has become all the more popular as this method studies the networks of social media users, their position in the network, and their influence in the networks, among other aspects (Delfanti & Arvidsson, 2019).

Sacks and Graves (2012) in their study associate different characteristics of social networks with different social networking sites, for instance, Twitter (now X) with network diffusion (quick and widespread dissemination) and network complexity (specific and factual information), LinkedIn with social distance (connections with friends of friends) and Facebook with network size and quality. Every social networking site has its dominant feature, and users need to be aware of these features so that these sites can be used for the user's desired purpose. The use of social networking sites does not matter only at the level of individual users but also sometimes at the level of countries or the world, especially in the case of social movements. While analysing social networks, Zhu (2015) concludes that the international network formed on Twitter is still arrayed along the core-periphery divide among countries of the world, with countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom at the centre and less developed countries at the margins. To bring peripheral countries to the centre, internet connectivity can play an important role by giving equal chances to participate in digital interactions.

**Activity - 1**

Identify the social networking site you use most and analyse the networks you have developed. Develop the concept of weak ties.

**6.3 SOCIAL PRESENCE THEORY**

Social Presence Theory was developed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976 to understand how media affect communication among participants. They primarily studied the influence of telecommunications on communication. The theory discusses the salience of interactants and their interpersonal relationship (Oh, Bailenson & Welch, 2018). Bickle, Hirudayaraj, and Doyle (2019) say that social presence is the degree to which a person is perceived as an «asperson» in computer-mediated communication or virtual environments. The theory postulates that the salience of interactants would depend on two factors, namely, immediacy and intimacy. Immediacy is the psychological distance between interactants, whereas intimacy refers to the connectedness among interactants when they communicate. The theory states that every medium differs in its social presence; for instance, the medium using both video and audio would have more social presence than the medium using only audio. Hence, the more social presence a medium can offer, the more effective the communication, as commonness among the participants would increase, which remains the sole aim of every communication process. Further, the medium with a high social presence is considered more personal, warm and sociable, while the medium with less social presence would be less personal (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017).

The theory has become all the more important in the present times as the concept of social presence is closely related to social media. Social media is also being used for learning purposes, and many studies (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Kreijns, Xu & Weidlich, 2022) point out that social presence is an important factor in the online learning environment. Wang & Wang (2012) found that specific online tasks, relationships with fellow online participants and attitudes towards course subjects and participants and instructor's immediacy remain some of the factors affecting the social presence during online learning. Studying brand promotion on Instagram, Johnson & Hong (2020) found that social presence positively relates to social media engagement. Further, using human faces in images instead of images of only products (i.e., more social presence) leads to more social media engagement. Nguyen et al. (2022) found that engaging with digital media that offer less social presence, such as email or online games, is negatively related to a sense of connectedness compared to digital media with higher social presence, such as voice or video calls.

**Activity – 2**

Think of online media that you are using for online learning. Identify and discuss the medium you feel helps you learn more easily than other media.

## 6.4 MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY

Richard Daft and Robert Lengel gave the media Richness theory in the early 1980s. The theory postulates that information is an important construct in all organisations, and all organisations have to deal with two information-related tasks, namely interpreting the external environment and coordinating internal activities. The major aim of both tasks is to reduce equivocality through sufficient information processing. In this information processing, different media, according to their richness, should be used by managers to function in their organisations effectively. The richness of a medium is defined as the potential information-carrying capacity of data (Deft & Lengel, 1983). If the communication of data provides new understanding, it is considered rich, whereas if the communication of data provides routine information, it is low in richness. Face-to-face discussions are considered media with high richness, while memos, bulletins and reports are counted among media with low richness. When the environment in the organisation is uncertain, difficult and equivocal, rich media should be used. In contrast, when the conditions are stable and calm, media with low richness, like memos and bulletins, may be used (Deft & Lengel, 1983). Effective managers should know the use of both kinds of media, with high richness and low, and the situations in which they are to be used.

Information/Communication Medium	Information Richness
Face-to-face	Highest
Telephone	High
Written, personal (letters, memos)	Moderate
Written, formal (bulletins, documents)	Low
Numeric Formal (computer output)	Lowest

Figure 1: Communication Media and Information Richness. Source: (Deft & Lengel, 1983)

When media richness theory was proposed, two components, written and oral, were considered for communication. However, with the arrival of social media, the possibilities have increased a lot. For instance, several audio, video and text are available these days. According to their richness value, the media may be used in interpersonal or group communication and by organisations with their customers. While exploring the use of verbal (text) and visual (emojis) by travel brands, Wang et al. (2024) found that the combination of verbal and visual in social media content can easily convey complex information and further interspersing visual content with verbal content can enhance user engagement. Liu, Fraustino, and Jin (2015) found that during the initial phase of a disaster, people intend to depend more on interpersonal relations through telephone calls or face-to-face interaction (richer media) than sharing, commenting or liking on social media (less rich media). However, giving a word of caution, Ledford (2012), in a research article, concludes that social media do provide exciting opportunities. However, at the same time, communicators might weigh the potential of a medium to deliver messages, especially in the case of ambiguous or complex information. For instance, giving quick and timely updates on a particular

topic through digital media or social media would make it easy for a user to get new information. However, the bombardment of new information every time might also demotivate the user to be alert all the time.

**Check Your Progress: 1**

**Note:** 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. How do you define the richness of a medium?

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2. When should media that are high in richness be used in organisations?

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## 6.5 PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

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Public Sphere theory is primarily based on the <Public Sphere> concept by Jürgen Habermas. In this concept, Habermas emphasises the importance of the Public Sphere in the effective working of democracy, as this sphere would be accessible to all citizens and give them an open forum in Political Communication.

Public Sphere theory about the media presents social media as an emerging Public Sphere. As social media is becoming accessible to more and more people, the chances of people participating in online discussions are also increasing. Social media is being called a platform where many movements for political and social causes have been initiated. Mathe and Motsaathebe (2024) see social media as a digital public sphere, allowing citizens to share, discuss and deliberate on different issues or concerns. Social media has been able to blur many boundaries, including geographic, economic and social, to bring people together on some platforms, enabling the exchange of diverse viewpoints.

However, some studies do not agree that social media can be called a public sphere. Some researchers argue that limited access and a lack of digital skills among many to use social media hinder the equal participation of all citizens. Hence, social media cannot be called the Public Sphere. For instance, Fuchs (2016) says questions like whether the ownership of social media organisations is democratic or not, whether there is any social or economic censorship on social media, whether there is an over-representation of views of corporate elites or how inclusive, sincere or reflexive online political discussions need to be addressed concerning the public sphere. After analysis of Twitter (now called X), which is considered one of the most important social media platforms for political discussions, Fuchs

(2016) concludes that Twitter is not a public sphere as the author writes, « Twitter advances a class-structured attention economy that privileges economically powerful actors over everyday users (198).

Fuchs (2016) stresses that Twitter is an information-disseminating medium, not a communication medium where everyday users can send honest opinions. Delfanti & Arvidsson (2019) conclude that the online public sphere enabled by the use of digital technologies might not be called democratic per se, as the digital media might change hierarchies but might not be able to make them disappear altogether. Similarly, Fuchs (2016) notes that social media can serve as a coordination and organisation tool but cannot replace collective action involving ground-level participation of citizens with real-time and space presence. Sevignani (2022) suggests that though the rise of the antagonistic and networked individualistic flow of communications has weakened the hegemonic flow of communication to enable more democratic processes, the exchange of popular communications needs to be strengthened by increasing the competencies of citizens.

### Activity– 3

1. Read any research article that discusses the concept of the public sphere vis-a-vis social media and summarise its main argument.
2. Think of any one recent social movement and discuss the role of social media in the public

## 6.6 SOCIAL INFLUENCE THEORY

Social Influence theory was given by Herbert Kelman in the early 1950s, as the name of the theory suggests, to understand the social influences that affect the attitudes and behaviour of individuals in society (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024). Social influence is the change in an individual's behaviour due to a person or a group of persons. Kelman (1958) says that social influence or change in attitude works based on: compliance, identification and internalisation. Attitude change occurs due to compliance when an individual changes their attitude or behaviour, not when one agrees with the change, but because one gets some reward or escapes some punishment or disapproval. Identification is said to induce the attitude change when an individual accepts social influence or changes behaviour to establish or maintain a self-defining relationship with another person or group, while attitude change due to internalisation would occur when the content of the induced behaviour is in congruence with the value system of an individual and hence, is accepted or internalised by an individual (Kelman, 1958). This theory of Social Influence can also be applied to social media, as the change in attitude or behaviour is affected by social media platforms. Compliance, identification, and internalisation processes can explain social media users' attitudes or behaviour change very well. For instance, it is generally observed among social media users that selfies or photographs are uploaded to get a certain number of likes. Here, anticipating getting a certain number of likes can be termed compliance, i.e., a reward for a particular type of behaviour.

In contrast, certain photographs or selfies are avoided to escape disapproval or dislike. Similarly, Hwang (2014) found that all three factors affect the practice of knowledge sharing by email, especially in high personal goal groups. Zhou (2021) also found that all three factors influence the users' intention to share information in Online Health Communities. Mulcahy et al. (2024) suggest that to tackle the spread of misinformation, especially by social media influencers, awareness campaigns like <Question It, Verify It: Empowering Minds, Debunking Lies> or <Think Twice, Share.

**Nice:** Be Sure Before You Share should be run. Explaining the concept of scalability in terms of spreading content quickly and reaching much wider audiences, Delfanti and Arvidsson (2019) note that this spread works both ways. This quicker and wider spread can be of information or content one wants to disseminate, or it might be that one does not want it to spread.

**Activity – 4**

Observe your friend's behaviour and try to identify which factor influences your friend's social media use.

**Check Your Progress: 2**

**Note:** 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1. List the three factors that influence the attitude or behaviour of individuals under Social Influence theory.

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**6.7 MEDIA DEPENDENCY THEORY**

As the name suggests, the Media Dependency theory, given by S.J. Ball Rokeach and M.L.L. DeFleur (1976), postulates that audiences depend on mass media for their information resources, and this dependency on mass media leads to alterations or modifications in the cognitive, affective and behavioural lives of audiences. Here, cognitive refers to changes in thinking processes; affective refers to changes in attitudes, whereas behavioural changes pertain to changes in the actions or behaviour of users. The nature of tripartite audience-media-society relationships determines the effects of media on people and society. Analysing the factors of an individual's dependency on media, Ball-Rokeach (1985) mentions that the focus of messages disseminated by mass media, the focus of interpersonal networks of an individual and personal goals remain some of the factors affecting an individual's dependency on media. All these factors might not align with others; for instance, the focus of mass media messages might not always align with the focus of interpersonal networks. Hence, the intersection of these factors decides an individual's dependency on media. This dependency on media becomes even higher in societies where media serves many unique and central information functions, and there is also high structural

instability due to pervasive conflict or rapid social change (Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Usually, three dimensions of human motivations or goals, namely Understanding (self and social), Orientation (action and interaction) and Play (Solitary and social), are fulfilled by media (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

Since social media is becoming an integral part of users' lives, users have become dependent on it for their different needs, from seeking information to making friends to participating in civil and social movements. As early as during the 2003 SARS epidemic in China, Tai & Sun (2007) concluded that as the socio-structural environment was not conducive to the free flow of information during a major public health crisis, users of the internet not only actively sought information from the internet but also attempted to create alternative sources of information for other users by becoming disseminators and producers of information. Similarly, studying the role of media during COVID-19 in China, Zanuddin and Xu (2022) found that media attention and media depy can lead to prosocial behaviour during the crisis, with self-efficacy acting as a mediating factor. With the increasing use of social media, the role played by mass media in fulfilling information needs is being taken over by social media (Kim & Jung, 2016). However, as mentioned, cognitive, affective or behavioural changes might not happen simultaneously, like online information-seeking and discussions on all topics might not always get converted into offline activities or participation. These changes might differ in activities or concerns; the changes that might take place in the case of leisure activities might not work in political activities. Kim and Jung (2016), in their study on social networking service dependency, found that there were fewer chances for online political and sports interactions to translate to offline activities than shopping. While analysing the use of YouTube after the death of public figure Michael Jackson, Lee (2011) found that the use of YouTube highlights the bi-directional dependency of media-audience society, where the platform acted as an online support system and helped connect a greater community-in-mourning.

#### Activity – 5

Which social media platform do you depend on most and why? Explain.

## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

Every concept related to human beings is developed into theories to understand the concept systematically; the workings of social media can also be understood and analysed better with the help of theories related to social media. This chapter has discussed the major theories related to social media. It may be noted here that most of the theories discussed in the chapter were propounded when the use of social media was not very popular. Most of the theories, whether the public sphere theory or social influence theory, were developed to explain the general workings of media. However, since the aim of every medium remains effective and efficient communication, these theories could be easily applied to the working of social media. For instance, in social presence theory, earlier, only media, such as face-to-face discussions or memos, were used to increase the presence of an individual in dealing with particular situations in organisations. However, these days,

even social media is being used to make the presence of an individual «real» even when the person is not present physically in a meeting. Another point we need to take into consideration is that no one theory necessarily would be able to explain the workings or influence of social media; we might need to combine the concepts from different theories to understand social media in a better way. Further, the theories discussed in this chapter are some of the major theories used to understand social media's use, nature, and effects. Some other theories, like the Uses and Gratifications theory, which was developed to understand the need for gratification of active audience from media, can also be applied to social media to understand and analyse the needs social media users have to gratify. Similarly, concepts like Echo Chambers or filter bubbles, which attempt to highlight the role of algorithms in social media, can also be useful in understanding the use and influence of social media. Therefore, as students of media, particularly social media, we need to be observant of the use and users of social media and explore the theories related to social media. Rather, as the use of social media is increasing, new theories related to social media might also be propounded.

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## 6.9 KEYWORDS

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**Compliance**—Compliance is one factor that influences an individual's attitude or behaviour. When an individual changes their attitude or behaviour because they get some reward or escape some punishment or disapproval, they are said to be influenced by compliance.

**Homophily** refers to similarities in the characteristics of individuals or groups that lead to the establishment of connections among them.

**Social Influence-** Social influence is defined as an individual's behaviour change due to a person or a group of persons.

**Social Presence**—Social presence is the degree to which a person is perceived to be “an actual person” in computer-mediated communication or virtual environments.

**Strength of a tie--** Strength of a tie is defined as a combination of contact intensity, intensity of emotions, intimacy and reciprocity among persons.

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## 6.10 FURTHER READINGS

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## 6.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress: 1

1. Media richness refers to the ability of a communication medium to convey information effectively, especially complex or ambiguous messages. A rich medium provides immediate feedback, supports multiple cues (such as body language, tone, and words), allows for personalisation, and facilitates the use of natural language.
2. Organisations should use high-richness media when communication involves uncertain, ambiguous, or emotionally sensitive issues. These include tasks like conflict resolution, performance feedback, negotiations, or strategic decision-making, where nuanced understanding and quick interaction are essential.

### Check Your Progress: 2

1. The three key factors that influence the attitude or behaviour of individuals under Social Influence Theory are:
  - A. **Compliance** – when individuals conform to gain rewards or avoid punishment.
  - B. **Identification** – when individuals adopt behaviour to establish or maintain a relationship with a person or group.
  - C. **Internalisation** – when individuals accept a belief or behaviour because it aligns with their value system.