

Socializing for Introverts in the Digital Age:
Rise of the Webtrovert
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Introduction

As social media sites like Twitter and Facebook have become an increasingly popular form of socializing, information and opportunities for those outside of the social norm have blossomed. Perhaps no group has benefited more from the creation of social media than introverts, who make up between one-third to one-half of the population. Though introverts are often stereotyped as anti-social, a more accurate description is “differently social.” (Cain, 2012, p. 226) Unlike extroverts, introverts prefer intimate, deep discussions between small groups of close friends rather than the boisterous small talk of many people. In the past few years the term “webtrovert” has arisen to define “someone who is very shy in real life, but turns into a full-on extroverted party animal on Internet forums and social sites.” Given the relative ease of communicating online, it seems that the Internet may have leveled the playing field for the different social abilities on the introvert-extrovert spectrum. In this study I will examine the tweets of Twitter users describing themselves with “#introvert” to see how users view introversion in the light of social media.

Methods

My initial data set of 845 tweets with “#introvert” created between June 29, 2013 and July 8, 2013 was made through the Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS), which I downloaded as an Excel worksheet. Before coding my data, I spent much time narrowing down the bulk of tweets to a more manageable total of 160. First, I used a text filter to eliminate all re-tweets (“RT”) because I wanted strictly original content, which took my number down to 648. Next, I took out foreign language tweets by using a filter for “en” on the user language column. This removed some, but not all the non-English tweets. Some multi-lingual users have their

language set to English but still tweet in other languages, so I combed through the remaining tweets and ended up with 559 after deleting all instances of foreign languages.

The third filter I used, “http,” eliminated tweets that were mostly links without original commentary. Next, I filtered text by “@” to reduce the number of irrelevant or meaningless conversations. These actions winnowed my selection to 404. I noticed that there were several tweets composed solely of, “#introvert,” and deleted those next. Then I read through the tweets, deleting those that were nonsense or uninteresting. This brought the total down to 324, which was still double my goal amount.

It was becoming difficult to decide how to limit my data set, so to make it easier on myself I copied all the tweets after 160 and pasted them into another document. Then, in an emotionally rather than scientifically driven fashion, I deleted them from my spreadsheet and felt relieved. Full disclosure: I am an INFJ (Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Judging) according to the Myers-Briggs Personality test.

As I was familiar with the data by this point, I started coding the remaining tweets based on the common themes I encountered: positive, negative, square peg, tired, and mixed. Positive (POS) was used when the author of the tweet had a positive view of his or her introversion. Examples of this type of tweet include feeling proud of being an introvert, and reporting enjoying activities and time spent alone. These users seem aware of the benefits of introversion, including that “introverts think before they act, digest information thoroughly, stay on task longer, and work more accurately.” (Cain, 2012, p. 168) Conversely, the code negative (NEG) was applied to tweets where the user has a negative view of his or her introversion. An example of this kind of tweet reads, “I wish I had thicker skin and I wish my voice didn’t disappear when I’m around more than two people.” (JBucha17, July 5, 2013)

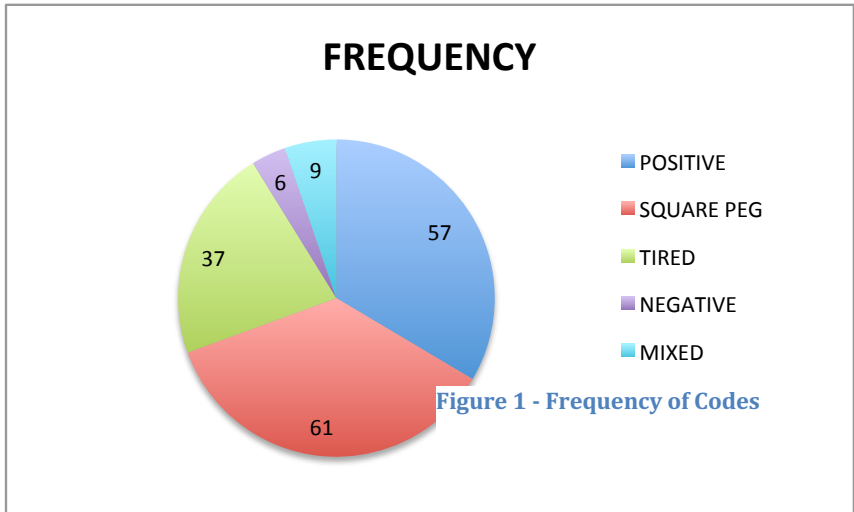
I tagged SP, “square peg,” on tweets that described feeling misunderstood, underappreciated, or not normal because of introverted tendencies. Many of these tweets use “awkward” or “anxious” to describe social interactions in the real world, and relay a feeling of guilt for preferring to be alone. These tweets also include tips for how to be more extraverted, which is a common “problem” for introverts. As celebrated introvert author Susan Cain notes, “Extraversion is an enormously appealing personality style, but we’ve turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform.” (2012, p. 4) SP exemplifies the struggle introverts feel between their true nature and trying to fit into a society where extraversion is the standard.

In reading through the tweets I noticed that feeling tired was a common sentiment, and used T to denote this. I created a separate category for this because in many cases it was neutral statement. Introverts have a higher base level of stimulation in their brains than extroverts, often leading to over-stimulation in situations where extroverts thrive like parties, large groups, and crowds. Feeling like one needs to recharge after social interaction is the hallmark of being an introvert, and as an inherent trait I think it should be neither positive nor negative.

MIX describes mixed emotional statements, such as, “Working late was always bittersweet: I hated losing my evening but loved the fact that everyone was gone.” (callmesokrates, July 5, 2013) Tweets with this tag did not fit as neatly into the square peg category, although they often imply some type of internal conflict. My total number of tweets became 170, which allowed for multiple codings.

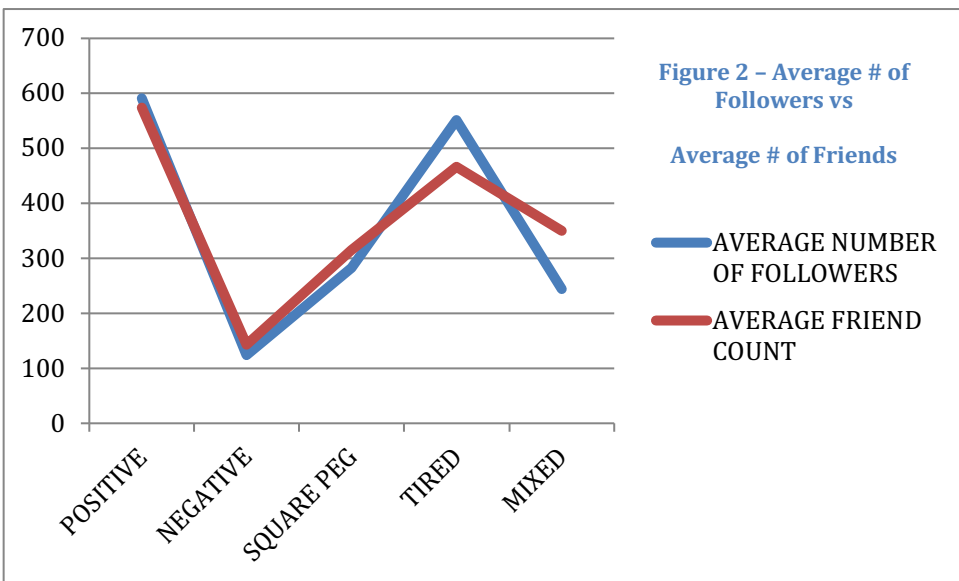
Results

From these codes I was able to see that most people using “#introvert” had an overwhelmingly positive view of introversion (see Figure 1.) Only six tweets (3.5%) described introversion in negative terms, compared to 57 (33.5%) positive. Perhaps this supports the results of a 2011 study, which found that “introverts exhibited higher levels of self-esteem and lower



levels of depression over time when they communicated and engaged in supportive relationships with online friends and acquaintances.” (Van Zalk, Branje, Dennisen, Van Aken, & Meeus, 2011)

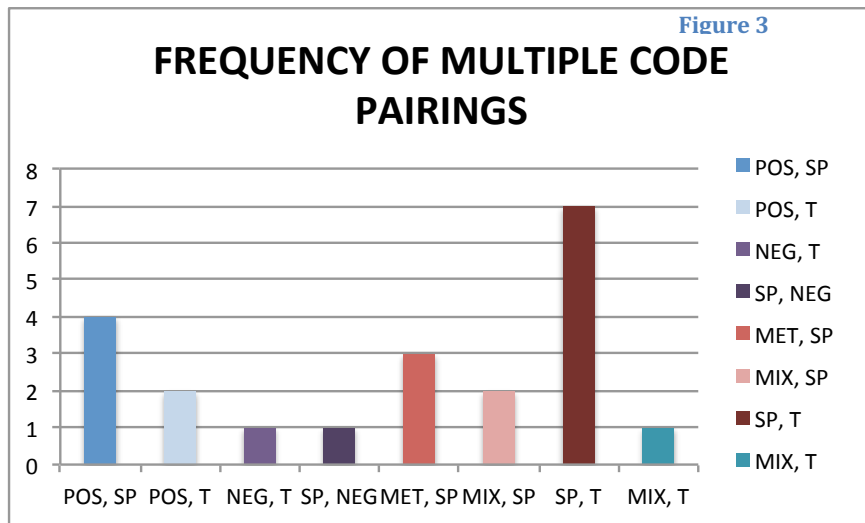
Interestingly, users who tweeted positive sentiments about their introversion had both the highest



average of followers and friends at 591 and 574 respectively (see Figure 2.) The results are striking when compared with the averages of negative users at 124 and 143,

as well as with the average twitter user’s follower count of 208.

However heartening the positivity of Twitterers may be, “square peg” still beat out positivity by four tweets, accounting for the largest percentage of total tweets at 35.9%. This category also had the most multiple-coding pairs, with “square peg/tired” as the most common (see Figure 3.) As Hertel et al. noted in their 2008 study, social media use “correspond[s] to the fulfillment of different interests and needs of the users, such as the need for control and self-protection or communication related self-efficacy beliefs.” (Hertel et al, 2008) Introverts who are



already worn down by “trying to appear like a zestful, reward-sensitive extrovert” to fit in socially are likely to seek out lower levels of stimulation more in tune with their temperament, such as

online communication. (Cain, 2012, p. 173)

Additionally, given the high number of square peg and tired tweets (98 combined, or 58% of total tweets), it seems that users are expressing themselves in a way that feels comfortable to an audience of other empathetic introverts. In many cases it is considered rude to duck social interaction or avoid small talk, and “it can be hard for extroverts to understand how badly introverts need to recharge at the end of a busy day.” (Cain, 2012, p. 228) The Internet provides a less-threatening outlet to express feelings of not fitting in with the extrovert standard. Professor Brian Little’s theory of “restorative niches” can be used to describe the appeal of the Internet as a safe haven: “the place you go when you want to return to your true self. It can be a physical

place...or a temporal one, like the quiet breaks you plan...or choosing e-mail or an in-person meeting.” (Cain, 2012, p.219) In many ways the Internet and the tools of social media are ideally suited for introverts, who often prefer a less taxing method of communication than face-to-face interaction.

Not all introverts hail the Internet as an answer to awkward or draining interactions, however. In fact, many avoid it for other common introverted traits, such as abhorring shallow conversation, or a reluctance to share personal information with strangers. Twitter user TyUnglebower expresses, “The coming of the internet was not the #introvert dream for me that it was for many people. I was paranoid about interacting online.” (October 24, 2011) In a study conducted by a provider of the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Instrument, preference for social media use was broken down into the 16 personality types to determine which traits are more like to use various networking sites. Although extroverted and introverted types mainly stuck to party lines, many questions yielded division among traits like “Thinking” vs “Feeling” or “Judging” vs “Perceiving.” Interestingly, the type most likely to use social media, ENFP (Extroverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceiving) was the exact opposite of the personality type least likely to socialize online—ISTJ, or Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging. (Shaubhut, Weber, & Thompson)

From my sample of data, it appears that introverted Twitter users used the format to express themselves outside of the real world, where they may feel restricted by socially accepted norm of extraversion. Additionally, most #introvert users shared a positive view of their personality trait, despite the tension of not fitting in all the time. The linking of self-generated content (tweets) and system-generated content (follower and friend counts) provides an interesting relationship that may warrant further study between personality traits and their online

manifestations.

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