



**THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF USING
FACEBOOK: A STUDY OF PALESTINIAN STUDENTS
IN THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
MALAYSIA**

BY

BADER N. A. ALAKKLOUK

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the uses and gratifications (U & G) theory of the use of Facebook among Palestinian students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The study is premised on U & G theory, which posits that individuals actively choose media or media content to satisfy their needs. In this study, IIUM Palestinian students provide their perspective towards the uses and gratifications of using Facebook as they experience living abroad. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 Palestinian students in IIUM because they are heavy users of Facebook Palestinians and students of the IIUM. Facebook is the most convenient platform to express ideas and opinions on the crisis of Palestine. Therefore, the number of Palestinian users on Facebook has increased significantly due to the Palestine-Israel conflict that is taking place in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem. This qualitative research study is to contribute in terms of examining student perception and how their needs could be gratified by Facebook and why the Social Networking Site (SNS) gratifies their needs. All participants in this study use Facebook actively in their daily life. The study proposed three research questions: (1) What needs of IIUM Palestinian students are gratified by Facebook? (2) Why does Facebook gratify the needs of IIUM Palestinian students? and (3) How could Facebook improve its features in gratifying the needs of IIUM Palestinian students? The Palestinian students were selected based on specific criteria: 1) IIUM students in Gombak, 2) Palestinian citizens and 3) active Facebook users. The participants were also between 23 and 32 years old, had one account on Facebook each, had been using Facebook for 5-10 years and had been visiting Facebook daily for 1-8 hours per day. The findings of the study identify the needs of participants that are gratified by Facebook as follows: connecting, source of news and information, freedom of expression, entertainment and academic purposes. The results also find the reasons why Facebook gratifies IIUM Palestinian students' needs. This is because SNS is perceived as a convenient platform, it is a famous SNS, it provides entertainment and allows the freedom of expression. In addition, the participants in this study pointed out three improvements that are required from Facebook that will motivate them to use the SNS in order to satisfy more needs: improving the privacy of users, reducing advertisements and allowing more freedom to express themselves.

ملخص البحث

تستكشف هذه الدراسة نظرية الاستخدامات والإشباع (U & G) من استخدام الفيسبوك بين الطلاب الفلسطينيين في الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية ماليزيا (IIUM). وتستند هذه الدراسة إلى نظرية (U & G) التي تفترض أن الأفراد يختارون بنشاط وسائل الإعلام أو المحتوى الإعلامي لإشباع حاجياتهم. في هذه الدراسة يقدم الطلاب الفلسطينيون في (IIUM) وجهة نظرهم تجاه الاستخدامات والإشباع في استخدام فيسبوك بناء على تجربتهم المعيشية في الخارج. أجريت مقابلات متعمقة مع عدد ١٢ طالبا فلسطينيا في جامعة (IIUM) حيث كونهم مستخدمين للفيسبوك بكثرة. يعد الفيسبوك المنصة الوسيطة الأكثر ملائمة لعرض الأفكار والآراء تجاه الأزمة الفلسطينية؛ ولذلك ازداد بشكل ملحوظ عدد مستخدمي الفيسبوك الفلسطينيين بسبب الصراع الفلسطيني الإسرائيلي الذي يحدث في الضفة الغربية وقطاع غزة والقدس. هذه الدراسة البحثية النوعية للمساهمة من حيث فحص تصور الطالب وكيف يتم إشباع احتياجاته من خلال الفيسبوك، ولماذا يرضى موقع الشبكات الاجتماعية (SNS) احتياجاتهم. وجميع المشاركين في هذه الدراسة يستخدمون الفيسبوك في حياتهم اليومية بنشاط. وقد اقترحت الدراسة ثلاثة أسئلة بحثية. (١) ما هي احتياجات الطلاب الفلسطينيين في (IIUM) التي تم إشباعها بواسطة الفيسبوك؟ (٢) لماذا الفيسبوك يشبع احتياجات الطلاب الفلسطينيين في (IIUM)؟ (٣) كيف يمكن للفيسبوك تحسين سياسته في إشباع احتياجات الطلاب في (IIUM)؟. تم اختيار الطلاب الفلسطينيين بناء على معايير محددة: (١) طلاب في جامعة (IIUM) جو مباك. (٢) مواطنون فلسطينيون. (٣) مستخدمون نشطون للفيسبوك. كان المشاركون أيضًا بين ٢٣ و ٣٢ سنة، يمتلكون حسابًا واحدًا في فيسبوك، وبلغ استخدام كل منهم للفيسبوك مدة من ٥ إلى ١٠ سنوات، كما بلغ معدل زيارتهم اليومية للفيسبوك من ١ إلى ٨ ساعات. وتحدد نتائج الدراسة احتياجات المشاركين التي تم إشباعها بواسطة الفيسبوك على النحو الآتي: التواصل، مصدر أخبار ومعلومات، حرية التعبير، الترفيه وأغراض أكاديمية. كما توصلت النتائج إلى أسباب إشباع الفيسبوك احتياجات الطلاب الفلسطينيين في (IIUM)؛ وذلك لأن مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي يُنظر إليها على كونها منصة ملائمة، وموقع شبكات اجتماعية ذو شهرة عالية بالإضافة إلى توفيره وسائل الترفيه المختلفة وسماحه بحرية التعبير. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أشار المشاركون في هذه الدراسة إلى ثلاثة تحسينات يفتقرون إليها في فيسبوك من شأنها تحفيزهم لاستخدام الموقع من أجل تلبية المزيد من هذه الاحتياجات مثل: تحسين خصوصية المستخدمين والحد من الإعلانات و السماح لمزيد من حرية التعبير عن أنفسهم.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....
Aida Binti Mokhtar
Supervisor

.....
Rizalawati Binti Ismail
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....
Zeti Azreen Binti Ahmad
Examiner

This dissertation was submitted to the Department of Communication and is accepted as a fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....
Aini Maznina A. Manaf
Head, Department of
Communication

This dissertation was submitted to the Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences and is accepted as a fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....
Mohammad Abdul Quayum
Acting Dean, Kulliyah of Islamic
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Bader N. A. Alakklouk

Signature.....

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents, and my siblings for their
continuous love, support, and prayers.*

*To teachers and friends who have
provided valuable assistance*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The usage of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) by worldwide community is expected to reach 2.95 billion by 2020 (Yelina, 2016). Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Skype, and LinkedIn are among the world's prominent sites (Baruah, 2012; Steckman & Andrews, 2017). They are characterized by the attributes of allowing everyone to register and own personal sites with the availability to send and receive multimedia information and news (Alejandro, 2010). As of 2016, Facebook is regarded as the most popular SNS with over one billion active users worldwide (Protalinski, 2016).

The popularity of Facebook has encouraged numerous Palestinian activists to establish their online presence in order to promote peace in Palestine and as a site to post articles (Khan & Jarvenpaa, 2010; Rojas, 2012; Sedghi, 2014). Concurrently, Mor, Ron and Maoz (2016) indicate that Facebook has become the medium for news dissemination in promoting the end of the Palestine-Israel conflict. The issues of Palestine are not confined to war-related matters but they involve the Israeli occupation's restriction on information and news regarding the torture, sufferings and injustice that have happened to citizens and reporters in Palestine (Lopes, 2014).

The SNS helps to eliminate obstacles to communication among Palestinians. In Palestine, people seek for alternative media like online media to disseminate and share information on the Palestinian cause (Vries, Simry & Maoz, 2015). For example, through Facebook, users have the opportunity to express their thoughts

without restriction. It also allows the possibility to share evidence via pictures or videos on the actual situation that is happening in Palestine. This particular specialty is significantly important to counter bias and false news on the Palestinian cause in traditional media (Kuttab, 2015). It is also important for the society worldwide to gain information and understand the truth is happening in Palestine through Facebook.

According to Estrin (2015), Facebook is regarded as the first source of news among Palestinian youth. As stated by Mourtada and Salem (2011), the usage of Facebook among youth aged 15 to 19-years-old in the West Bank and Gaza has reached 1.5 million users. Similarly, another study indicates that 46% of Palestinians aged 18 to 24-years-old use Facebook as the main source of news and information (Younis & Mufle, 2010). As such, it is concluded that a large number of Palestinian Facebook users worldwide are young people. In accordance with this study, the selection of Palestinian students is suitable because they represent the young people that refer to Facebook in their daily life. Due to this fact, the sample size consists of youth. Previous studies have suggested that the best approach to use when conducting a case study is by selecting a sample size that represents a fraction of the actual population (Ali, 2014; Fox & Hunn, 2009), and apparently the Palestinian youth represent a significant number of the population.

However, Palestinians face numerous challenges in their attempt to use Facebook as a medium of expression. The Israeli occupation has enacted a new policy that restricts individual rights in freedom of speech on SNS (Strickland, 2014). During the Israeli occupation, there has been an increase in the number of arrested Palestinian users who post items against the Israelis on Facebook. Many Palestinian people comprising students, reporters, journalists and politicians are imprisoned due to their Facebook updates (Abu Zayyad, 2015). In addition, Facebook and other social media

companies have announced that they would collaborate to reduce online terrorist propaganda by Palestinian people after being pressured by Israeli leaders (Baker, 2016).

This research aims to evaluate and investigate the usage of Facebook by Palestinian students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). This study identifies the needs of IIUM Palestinian students who are gratified by Facebook, to find out why Facebook gratifies the needs of IIUM Palestinian students and to determine how Facebook could improve its features in gratifying the needs of IIUM Palestinian students.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Communication mechanism has improved significantly in the last few decades due to the advancement of technology. Nowadays, people can communicate instantly regardless of the distances in geographical locations and time. In other words, differences in spatial locations and time have collapsed by technology (Arbanowski, Van Der Meer, Steglich & Popescu-Zeletin, 2001).

Palestine has been going through upheavals for some decades now. It is in continual bloody conflict with Israel. One serious negative result of this is that Israel has imposed a restriction on the kind of information or news that the Palestinian media can disseminate through their traditional reportage. The negative effects of this on Palestinians, especially students living outside the shores of the country are great. They are in perpetual fear and worry about the safety and conditions of their relations and friends back home. However, earlier studies (e.g., Pempek et al., 2009; Pfeil et al., 2009; Najjar, 2015) have found that foreign students often use SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and BlogSpot as sources of authentic and reliable

information about their home countries. This study therefore sets to find out the needs that are gratified by the IIUM Palestinian students who use Facebook.

From the researcher's observation, a large number of Palestinian students cannot afford to frequently call their family at home because they are not financially able to bear the costs of international calls charged by service providers. Given this situation, Palestinian students of IIUM have to find ways out of their predicament. Fortunately for them, SNSs provide them with opportunities to communicate with their loved ones and to gain access to news updates about their country. Therefore, many of them have at least one Facebook account each.

Consequently, the present study is necessary to investigate the factors that motivate Palestinian students of IIUM to use Facebook and to find out why it gratifies their needs which could be influenced by the war that is going on in their home country. Individuals in foreign countries need to acquire the latest news and updates; this is of utmost importance when conflicts or calamities such as natural disasters, occur in their home countries. This is supported by Ding and Zang's (2010) research which investigated the usage of SNS for news dissemination in China and the United States during the outbreak of the H1N1 epidemic. They found that different cultures and institutions may take very different approaches in using social media to disseminate risk messages and to invite or block public participation in risk communication and risk management processes. This study is similar to Ding & Zang's (2010) study in that the people in Palestine cannot disseminate information through the traditional media and as a result, Palestinian students in IIUM have to get news from Facebook.

In addition, many of the studies conducted have been focusing on the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory in relation to SNS. For instance, the study by Bonds-

Raacke and Raacke (2010) identifies the dimensions of uses and gratifications for SNS; the study by Ko, Cho and Roberts (2015) concentrates interactive advertising while a study by Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) focuses on social capital in the use of Facebook and its relation to college students' life satisfaction. As far as the researcher knows, there has not been any study utilising the U&G theory in relation to Facebook which focuses on Palestinian students residing in a foreign country. Therefore, the present study aims at ascertaining the needs of IIUM Palestinian students that are gratified by Facebook, why they are gratified by Facebook and the improvements that need to be made to features of Facebook for it to be more effective.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study focuses on U&G theory, Facebook and Palestinian university students studying abroad. The study is significant because no previous research has been conducted on these aspects together except on separate issues such as the growth of SNS on the dissemination of information (Katrina, 2016), the significant features of SNS (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011) and the motivational factors in using Facebook (Tosun, 2012). Therefore, this study is hopefully able to fill the gap in the extant literature.

In addition, the study also contributes to current knowledge on U&G theory. By examining the factors that motivate Palestinian students living abroad, i.e. Palestinian students of IIUM to use Facebook, and to find out whether their needs are met and gratified by Facebook, this study broadens our understanding of U&G theory on university students who live abroad, coming from a home country experiencing conflict. For instance, the results of the study can help researchers, academics and

students to get a better understanding of the needs and gratifications of Facebook users who are Palestinian students living abroad.

More so, the study also has some significance and implications for technological advancement. It reveals the features which Facebook users, particularly among students, are not comfortable with and also proposes improvements needed on the features of Facebook. This will perhaps help enhance the effective use of Facebook in terms of gratifying more needs. This is also capable of attracting more users to join Facebook and make the existing ones more active in their use of the medium.

Furthermore, the research is significant because it serves to validate some prior studies such as those done by Garber (2016) who concludes that Facebook is the main source of communication and information often used among all SNSs and Livingston and Asmolov (2010) who state that people, who live outside of their home countries tend to choose Facebook as the main medium of interaction and connection with their counterparts. This has a greater significance with respect to Palestinian students as Ben and Bahour (2009) maintain that the restriction imposed on Palestinian journalists for news dissemination hinders the opportunity for Palestinians living outside of Palestine from obtaining reliable and trustworthy news. Similarly, Berger (2013) indicates that the worry and stress of not knowing what might happen to friends and family in people's home countries when there is war further intensifies the need for a reliable and trusted communication channel. Therefore, the current study supports in theoretical terms that there is a consonance with the underlying school of thought of the Uses and Gratifications theory and its findings. In addition, this study provides insights on the required improvements from Facebook to gratify more needs among Palestinian students.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives which the current study aims to achieve are to:

1. Identify which needs of IIUM Palestinian students are gratified by Facebook.
2. Find out why Facebook gratifies the needs of IIUM Palestinian students.
3. Determine how Facebook could improve its features in gratifying the needs of IIUM Palestinian students.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What needs of IIUM Palestinian students are gratified by Facebook?
2. Why does Facebook gratify the needs of IIUM Palestinian students?
3. How could Facebook improve its features in gratifying the needs of IIUM Palestinian students?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This section discusses key information on SNSs in general and on Facebook in particular. Moreover, it provides a review of previous literature on the theory of Uses and Gratifications that is related to the study of SNS and Facebook. A theoretical framework on the theory of U&G is discussed thoroughly in this section.

2.2 SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNSS)

SNSs are online service platforms that help to build social network relations among people regardless of demographic attributes (Omekwu, Eke & Odoh, 2014). They are websites that allow users to create their own personal accounts to communicate and interact with others (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), the SNS is a web-based service that enables individuals to construct a public profile within an organized system. The algorithm of the SNS is a unique attribute that allows the system to suggest mutual connections to prospective users. SNSs provide a platform for individuals to share, exchange and discuss information via texts, pictures, audios and videos that are connected 24 hours with the Internet (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014).

The SNS is currently regarded as the main platform for people to communicate whether they are living in different countries and are of different nationalities (Wheeldon, 2010). It diminishes the boundaries of distance and restrictions on sharing information, files, pictures, videos and messages with friends

and family (Sawyer, 2011). The SNS is considered as an ideal place for individuals to satisfy the need for affiliation and interpersonal communication (Paquette, 2013). Nowadays, millions of individuals communicate through the social media in formal and informal communications because of the popularity of the sites and the easiness in using the application (Bicen & Cavus, 2010; Popoola, 2014). The main feature of the SNS is linking by connecting or making new friends, allowing people to learn more about their new friends and get to know them better (Lenhart, 2015).

The development of the social media has encouraged many scholars to examine the concept by using U&G theory in measuring users' motivation factors. There are many studies conducted to explore the usage of the SNS. According to Chung and Nam (2007), the usage of SNSs among youth helps to satisfy the need for affiliation by maintaining positive and affective relationships with each other. Based on U&G theory, Raine (2008) indicates that SNS users can be classified based on their motivations for using it that include sources of information, entertainment, diversion, social utility and convenience. Whiting and Williams (2013), on the other hand, identify ten gratifications from using SNSs which are social interaction, information seeking, pass-time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information-sharing and surveillance or knowledge about others.

College students use SNSs for many reasons. These include keeping in touch with friends, sharing photos, keeping in touch with family and for entertainment (Ezumah, 2013). According to some studies conducted by Omekwu, Eke and Odoh (2014) and Popoola, (2014), the majority of students use SNSs for academic purposes such as interaction with friends, connecting with their classmates for online studying and for discussing serious national issues. As stated by Musa, Azmi and Ismail

(2016), people turn to SNSs for self-learning and education.

The individual preference on the selection of the SNS as a communication channel is influenced by motivations that are shaped in part by the users' social status, social psychology predispositions and position in the social structure (Abbas & Mesch, 2015). It is also influenced by the characteristics of the application itself such as size, diversity of audiences and privacy boundary type (Choi & Bazarova, 2015).

Many adults worldwide are Facebook users and it plays a significant role as an online platform that allows individuals or its users to create personal and/or business content pages (Chan, 2009). In the last decade, Facebook has been regarded as the application that opens the doors of communication between people and organizations alike to get some kind of news (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010). This bring us to the following section to know more about Facebook.

2.3 FACEBOOK AND ITS FEATURES

Facebook is an online website that has witnessed millions of users around the world who participate in a virtual communication environment (Darwish & Lakhtaria, 2011). In 2006, 50% of the United Kingdom's population has an account on Facebook which numbers approximately 31 million individuals of different demographic attributes (Chaffey, 2017). In 2018, the number of Facebook users in the United States is expected to reach 201.1 million (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). The popularity of Facebook in Malaysia is reported by Mahadi (2013) who states that approximately 13.3 million individuals which represent 45.5% of the Malaysian population have an account on Facebook.

The first key feature of Facebook is that it encourages the habit of providing

information updates. Facebook is one of the SNSs that allow the creation of public profiles with the availability to upload photos and videos and send messages to others (Kashif, 2013; Broughton, Foley, Ledermaier, & Cox, 2013). Similarly, Ferrucci and Tandoc Jr (2015), indicating that the usage of Facebook has created the habit to daily update photos and news on personal activities online.

The second key feature is that Facebook allows advertising like other online social networks (Dembosky, 2012). Facebook offers a new model to advertise and engage with consumers, it allows consumers to advertise their products and business owners to receive feedback about their products or services, by creating pages or groups devoted to their brand (Curran, Graham, & Temple, 2011). Facebook thus improves their advertising policy at all times.

Another key feature is that users are allowed to share information on Facebook (Houghton, Joinson, Caldwell & Marder, 2013). The online sharing of information feature promotes the increased use of communication activities among people, especially among students of educational institutions (Baruah, 2012). Therefore, studies of how people choose to share information on Facebook, their privacy concerns and their awareness about these issues have been carried out (Golbeck & Mauriello, 2016; Madden, Lenhart & Cortesi, 2013; Paul et al., 2012).

The fourth feature of Facebook is its privacy settings; Facebook permits its users to set their own privacy settings to all friends including acquaintances in sharing basic information on Facebook including usernames, hometown, gender, birth date, interest in (e.g. women, men), looking for (friendship, relationship, and networking), political views, religious views and family members. Personal information comprises interest, favourite music, favourite quotations, favourite movies, favourite television shows and favourite books (Facebook.com, 2017). On

one hand, contact information contains email addresses, urls of personal websites or blogs, instant messaging screen names, home addresses, and mobile numbers. On the other, education history includes information on universities, high schools, and study specialization (Facebook.com, 2017).

The users are concerned about the information the application can access, at the same time, users are generally under-informed about what information Facebook can access. In many cases, fewer than 60% of Facebook application users are aware that it could access the users' private information (Golbeck & Mauriello, 2016). Therefore, Facebook should work towards its security settings in order to save its users from privacy breach and various cyber-attacks (Jabee & Alam, 2016).

In many cases, users are unwilling to modify and manage their privacy settings to protect their personal information (Lipford, Besmer & Watson, 2008). In addition, several studies and experiences have proven that the ability to understand and modify privacy settings is generally missing and users need to train and fine tune their own settings (Paul, et al., 2012). Although Facebook provides privacy settings, they are not effective among users because there is little awareness among active users towards existing privacy mechanisms on Facebook (Rashidi, Vaniea & Camp, 2016). However, it is not a difficult feature for Facebook to make by adjusting the settings to make it easier to protect users' privacy, through a practical and effective way to identify and evaluate privacy. Users should be aware of the steps in ensuring the privacy settings and where they stand in the privacy measuring scale (Jabee & Alam, 2016).

The fifth feature is linkages. Facebook has made it easy for users to connect with other people on Facebook. Users can search for people they know or browse for people with similar interests and become friends with them (Cronin, 2009; Lenhart,

2015).

The final feature of Facebook is to delete comments that contain abusive, offensive, threatening or harassing language, personal attacks of any kind, or offensive terms that target specific individuals or groups (Erbschloe, 2017). In addition, Facebook will delete comments that are clearly off-topic, that promote services or products, or promote/oppose any political party/person/campaigning for elected office, or any ballot proposition (Hille & Bakker, 2014).

2.4 USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY AND FACEBOOK

The popularity of Facebook and its rapid growth worldwide has encouraged researchers to conduct studies by using U&G theory to identify the motivations of users and the effects of Facebook on individuals and the societal context (Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012; Basilisco & Cha, 2015). Many studies have identified users' need to keep in touch with friends as a common motivation for Facebook use (Ellison, Lampe & Steinfield, 2007; Joinson, 2008; Sheldon, 2008).

On the other hand, college students have been the population of interest in studies regarding Facebook around the world (Jafarkarimi, Sim, Saadatdoost & Hee, 2016; Kim, 2014; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Students are more likely to use Facebook and are significantly more open to use Facebook to support classroom work (Roblyer et al., 2010). Facebook is a network that indirectly connects students with other students to create a learning community (Eteokleous, Ktoridou, Stavrides & Michaelidis, 2012).