Are Close Friends the Enemy? Online Social Networks, Narcissism and Self-Control

Keith Wilcox, Babson College, USA
Andrew Stephen, University of Pittsburgh, USA

This research demonstrates that social networks lead people to adopt a narcissistic mindset. This mindset remains active after social network use such that people show narcissistic tendencies after logging-off the network. Specifically, browsing a social network is shown to lead to poor self-control and higher levels of situational narcissism.

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Online Social Networks: Why Do We Use Online Social Networks and How Do They Affect Us?

Chair: Eva Buechel, University of Miami, USA

Paper #1: Need Satisfaction from Interacting with People Versus Content: The Roles of Motivational Orientation and Identification with Social Media Groups

Donna L. Hoffman, UC Riverside, USA
Thomas P. Novak, UC Riverside, USA

Paper #2: Facebook Therapy? Why People Share Self-Relevant Content Online

Eva Buechel, University of Miami, USA
Jonah Berger, Wharton, USA

Paper #3: Are Close Friends the Enemy? Online Social Networks, Narcissism and Self-Control

Keith Wilcox, Babson College, USA
Andrew Stephen, University of Pittsburgh, USA

Paper #4: The Facebook Effect: Are Judgments Influenced by the Knowledge That Others Are Also Evaluating?

Claire I. Tsai, University of Toronto, Canada
Min Zhao, University of Toronto, Canada
Dilip Soman, University of Toronto, Canada

SESSION OVERVIEW

Online social networks (OSNs), such as Facebook and Twitter, have experienced exponential growth in membership in recent years. As of 2010, 74% of American internet users visit social networks regularly and an average user spends one quarter of the time online on these sites. The most popular online social network is Facebook with 155 million users in America and 845 million users worldwide. Surveys show that 48% of 18-34 year old users check their Facebook account right when they wake up, 28% of which report doing so before even getting out of bed. These numbers demonstrate that online social networking sites have become a part of our everyday lives, revolutionizing the way we spend our time, the way we communicate and the way we maintain relationships. But why do people use these sites in the first place? And how does using these sites impact consumer behavior and well-being? While it is clear that online social network usage is frequent and important, questions about what drives people to use them, and the general impact they have on users are not well understood. Focusing on both, the antecedents and consequences of online social networks, this session aims to answer these questions. The session unifies four complementary papers that examine the motivators for online social networking, as well as the consequences they have for consumer well-being, their judgment and decision making, and marketers more generally.

The first paper examines the antecedents of online social networking. Using multilevel linear modeling with a large sample of social media users, Hoffman and Novak investigate why people use online social networks. Compared to previous research, which has mainly stressed social connections as a motivation to engage in OSN, they examine how both, social goals and content goals can interact with dispositional tendencies and motivational orientation to satisfy needs of relatedness, autonomy and competence.

The second paper looks at both, a motivator for, and a consequence of online social networking. Many OSNs allow users to share short messages about their thoughts, feelings and actions (e.g., Facebook status updates) with their online social network. Buechel and Berger examine why people post such self-relevant content online. Using survey and experimental data, they suggest that sharing such messages is driven in part by emotionally instability. In particular, emotionally unstable individuals use this feature to express their emotions, and doing so helps boost their well-being by increasing perceived social support after negative emotional experiences.

The next two papers focus on the consequences of online behavior. Wilcox and Stephen show some surprising and important negative consequences of using Facebook. Experimental data shows that browsing Facebook (as opposed to a neutral website) leads to an increase in spending and a decrease in performance on a persistence self-control task. A correlational study establishes the relationship between Facebook usage and a number of negative health and financial well-being markers. These negative consequences, they argue, result from an increase in self-esteem after exposure to Facebook, which can activate a narcissistic state and result in self-control failure. Finally, Tsai, Zhao and Soman investigate the influence of online social networks on consumers’ judgment. In four studies, they show that the mere knowledge of virtual others leads to less extreme objective and subjective judgments. The reason for this, they propose, is that virtual others increase the uncertainty about the accuracy of their judgments, which leads to a decrease in judgment confidence and consequently, the need to conform. This need to conform then reduces the extremity of judgments. Consistent with their theorizing, they find that making conforming undesirable mitigates the virtual others effect, leading to judgments that resemble a control condition with no knowledge of virtual others.

Taken together, this set of complete papers provides a deeper understanding of the motivators to engage in online social networking and its consequences for consumer decision making, self-control and well-being. Given the novelty and the timeliness of the session topic, its practical importance, as well as its theoretical relevance for many areas of consumer behavior, such as emotion regulation, self-control, goal pursuit and judgment and decision making, the session is expected to appeal to a large audience in the field of consumer research. The session is thus likely to produce a fruitful interdisciplinary discussion that will lead to more research on online social networks and online consumer behavior more generally.

Need Satisfaction from Interacting with People versus Content: The Roles of Motivational Orientation and Identification with Social Media Groups

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As social media use continues to increase, it is critical for consumer behavior researchers to gain a deep understanding of what motivates consumer use and leads to need satisfaction. Using the self-determination theory framework which stresses that autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster motivation and engagement for activities, we evaluate how motivational orientation and the importance to identity of one’s online social groups (ISM) influence how relatedness, autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan 2000) need satisfaction may emerge from one’s interactions with either other people or content. Although it may seem obvious that social media use can drive the experience of feeling related, consumers may seek additional fundamental experiences from social media goal pursuit, including competence and autonomy (Deci and Ryan 1985).
In the Web’s early days, Hoffman and Novak (1996) noted that computer-mediated communication was differentiated from traditional mass media because it incorporated both person-interactivity and machine-interactivity. While the likelihood of satisfying basic needs through person-interactivity is fairly obvious, the satisfaction of such needs through machine- (i.e., via social media technology) interactivity, or interactivity with social media content, is less clear. Researchers examining social media usage tend to consider social media goals as those for which the primary objective is to connect with other people (e.g., Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch 2011), but in addition to interacting with other people when using social media, people also engage in behaviors focused primarily on either consuming or creating social media content (Hoffman and Novak 2011). We denote the former goals, social goals, and the latter goals, content goals.

In our framework, whether or not these fundamental needs are satisfied depends on the goal-specific motivations underlying goal pursuit, along with dispositional tendencies. For example, a person high in a dispositional need for relatedness may be particularly motivated to use social media to experience the satisfaction of relatedness needs. But as social media interactions take place in a social context involving other groups of people, a disposition uniquely relevant to the context is also likely to play an influential role. We argue that such a disposition involves the importance to one’s identity of one’s online social groups, a construct we refer to as identification with social media (ISM). This construct is adapted from the identity aspect of collective self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) and derives from the idea that individuals are motivated to maintain and enhance their collective or social identity, not just their personal identity (Rosenberg 1979). As such it captures the importance of one’s social groups to one’s self-concept.

Our conceptual model predicts how the type of social media goal individuals pursue while engaging in social media behavior is likely to moderate the relationship between 1) need satisfaction and intrinsic motivational goal orientation (hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c), 2) need satisfaction and introjected (a form of extrinsic) motivational goal orientation (hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c), and 3) need satisfaction and the individual difference ISM (hypotheses 3a, 3b and 3c).

Multilevel data were collected at both person and goal levels in a web-based study of 338 participants. At the goal level (Level 1), participants identified their five most important objectives when using social media and rated each objective on goal importance, need satisfaction (relatedness, autonomy and competence), intrinsic and introjected motivation, and two process measures (direct experience and control). At the person level (Level 2), we collected four dispositional measures (ISM, relatedness, autonomy and competence) and five types of social media usage. The 1690 goals were classified by two independent judges into three categories: social goals, content goals, or not classifiable due to insufficient information (Krippendorff’s alpha =.865, see Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). Disagreements were resolved by consensus and 40 goals that could not be classified were eliminated.

To test our three sets of hypotheses, multilevel linear models were estimated using maximum likelihood, using the sample of all the social and content goals (n=1650). Separate models were fit for each of the three competence and the three social goal-level variables, relatedness, autonomy and competence. The model for each dependent variable included the following fixed effects: main effect for goal type (Level 1), main effects for intrinsic and introjected motivation (Level 1), main effect for ISM (Level 2), interaction of goal type-by-intrinsic motivation (hypotheses 1a and 1b), interaction of goal type-by-introjected motivation (hypotheses 2a and 2b), and the cross-level interaction of goal type-by-ISM (hypotheses 3a and 3b). In addition, the hypothesis model included three control variables – goal importance (Level 1), social media usage (Level 2), and need disposition (Level 2). For need disposition, the Level 2 dispositional covariate was used that corresponded to the Level 1 goal-specific dependent variable (i.e., relatedness, autonomy, or competence). Goodness-of-fit tests, parameter estimates and tests of significance are omitted in the interests of space.

Hypotheses were tested by evaluating conditional slopes. All hypotheses were supported. Higher intrinsic motivation led to greater relatedness need satisfaction for social goals compared to content goals (hypothesis 1a), higher intrinsic motivation increased autonomy more for content goals than for social goals (hypothesis 1b), and intrinsic motivation equally increased competence for both social and content goals hypothesis 1c). Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted the reverse pattern of results for introjected motivation for relatedness and autonomy need satisfaction. Content goals, compared to social goals, led to higher relatedness when motivation was introjected (hypothesis 2a) and autonomy increased more for social goals compared to content goals when introjected motivation was high (hypothesis 2b). Similar to hypothesis 1c, introjected motivation increased competence for content goals, as well as social goals (hypothesis 2c).

Identification with social media boosted the experience of relatedness need satisfaction for content goals (hypothesis 3a) and amplified the experiences of autonomy and competence need satisfaction for social goals (hypotheses 3b and 3c). Multilevel structural equation modeling tested the hypothesized processes. ISM was found to increase relatedness need satisfaction for content goals by strengthening the experience of a more direct online social connection and increased autonomy and competence need satisfaction for social goals by facilitating feelings of control in online social contexts. These results establish several fundamental effects that may be useful as consumer behavior researchers work to increase fundamental understanding of why people use social media.

Facebook Therapy? Why People Share Self-Relevant Content Online

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Internet has become a pervasive part of everyday life, yet its impact on well-being is not well understood. Researchers (Kraut et al. 1998; Tonioni et al. 2012) and cultural critics (Yoffee 2009) argue that the Internet is addictive and that it reduces face-to-face interaction, leaving people depressed, anxious, and lonely. Further, sites based on social interaction (i.e., Facebook) are said to be merely “havens...for people with poor self-image...and narcissists demanding the world’s attention,” (DiSalvo 2010, p. 53), oftentimes leading to disapproval by other users (Buffardi and Campbell 2008; Forest and Wood 2012). They are associated with negative health and financial behaviors (Wilcox and Stephen 2012) and expose users to physical and cyber risk (Gross and Acquacy 2005). Given these downsides, why is online social networking so popular?

We suggest that certain online behaviors may improve well-being short-term. One of most popular features of many online social networks is micro blogging, a feature that gives users the opportunity to post short messages (e.g., status updates) about their thoughts, feelings, or actions for their online friends to read and potentially respond. Though one might argue that these “updates” are driven by vanity or by the need for extraverts to maintain existing social ties (Gosling et al. 2011) we argue that the sharing of such information with online friends can have another function. In particular, we suggest that users frequently share emotions through status updates and...
that this type of sharing can aid emotion regulation, boosting well-being after negative emotional experiences by eliciting expected social support (Rimé 2009).

This “social buffer” we hypothesize is of particular importance for low emotionally stable individuals. Low emotionally stable individuals experience emotions more intensely (Barr, Kahn, and Schneider 2008) and negatively (Costa and McCrae 1980) and are less adept at regulating their emotion on their own (Gross and John 2003). Although this leaves them with a heightened need to share their emotions with others (Saxena and Mehrotra 2001), low affiliation and their tendency to be socially apprehensive (Luminet et al. 2000) makes it difficult for these individuals to do so offline. Consequently, we argue that they are more likely to rely on their online social network to help them deal with their emotions. After all, their online friends increase their perceived social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007) and the online setting makes emotional sharing less threatening (Bargh and McKenna 2004). In tree studies we test this possibility.

In study 1 we examine whether low emotionally stable individuals update their status more frequently and share more emotions when doing so. Participants in this study were asked to report how often they updated their Facebook status. In addition they were asked to copy their 10 most recent status updates into the survey. They then reported the extent to which they used OSNs to interact with people, share experiences, share emotions, display identity, or to seek information from other users. They also completed the Big Five Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann 2003). Regression analysis revealed that emotional stability was the only personality factor significantly related to status updating, whereby less emotionally stable participants reported updating their status more frequently. This relationship was mediated by their self-reported motivation to use online social networks to express emotion. Furthermore, content analysis of their status updates revealed that less emotionally stable individuals expressed more emotions in their updates.

In study 2 we test whether this increased emotional sharing is unique to online social networks. Participants randomly assigned to an offline condition reported the frequency of sharing their emotions in person. Participants in an online condition reported the frequency of sharing their emotions through status updates. Participants in this condition also reported how often they updated their Facebook status, as well as their preference for online vs. offline sharing. Finally the Big Five personality factors were assessed. As expected, a significant interaction revealed that while low emotionally stable individuals shared more emotions online than emotionally stable ones, this tendency was not observed in offline sharing, making this tendency unique to online sharing. Replicating the findings of study 1 with a different population, the results also again demonstrate that less emotionally stable people post more status updates and further, that this relationship is mediated by their preference for online over offline emotion expression.

In Study 3 we examined the consequences of such emotional sharing. First, negative affect was induced through false feedback on a performance task (Forgas 1991). Participants also provided a known other’s email address to ensure that a known other was similarly activated across conditions. Next, they completed a “writing study”. Some participants wrote about a control topic (office products). The other three conditions wrote about their current emotions, either (1) in private, or (2) to be shared with the known other who they were told would not be able to respond or (3) who might respond. Finally, participants reported their current well-being, perceived social support (Metzler 2003), and emotional stability (McCrae and Costa 2004). Results demonstrated that emotional writing to a known other who might respond helped low emotionally stable individuals repair well-being after negative experiences. These benefits did not accrue for participants writing in general (control), writing about emotions (i.e. venting), or sharing emotion with a known other alone. Instead, the notion that a known other would read what they had written and potentially respond (as on OSNs) boosted well-being. Finally, consistent with our theorizing, this boost in well-being from sharing with potential response was mediated by perceived social support.

These results of the three studies provide insight into a motivator for, and benefit of, online social networking. Emotional unstable individuals are more likely to post status updates and write about their emotions when doing so. Further, such emotional writing, paired with the potential to receive social support – as on social networking sites – helps them repair well-being after negative experiences.

Are Close Friends the Enemy?

Online Social Networks, Narcissism and Self-Control

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online social networks are having a fundamental and important influence on society. Facebook, the largest social network, has over 750 million active users (www.facebook.com). Despite their popularity, a systematic understanding of the effect of social networks on consumer behavior remains elusive. Does using a social network, for instance, impact the choices consumers make in their daily lives? If so, what effect does social network use have on consumers’ well-being?

People use social networks to fulfill a variety of social needs, including affiliation, self-expression, and self-presentation. Consequently, social network use can have a positive effect on how people feel about themselves and their well-being. For instance, when adolescents receive positive feedback on their social network profile, it enhances their self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg, Peters, and Schouten 2006). Importantly, people tend to share mostly positive information about themselves to others on social networks (Gonzales and Hancock 2011). Thus, simply browsing a social network has been shown to momentarily increase users’ self-esteem (Gonzales and Hancock 2011).

While high levels of self-esteem are often associated with positive social behavior, there also is a “dark side” to high self-esteem, particularly when it comes in the form of narcissism. Narcissism is often conceptualized as a personality trait that is associated with high levels of self-esteem and self-promoting tendencies. We propose that narcissism may not only be a personality trait, but also a state that can be activated by social network use. Specifically, we argue that since social networks facilitate self-presentation and boost self-esteem, the use of a social network should lead people to adopt a narcissistic mindset. We further propose that this mindset will remain active after social network use and affect behavior after the users have logged-off the network.

These predictions were tested in four studies. We demonstrate that browsing a social network lowers self-control, thereby reducing performance in subsequent tasks requiring self regulation. Additionally, we demonstrate that browsing a social network can lead people to display other narcissistic tendencies, such as defensive self-enhancement. Importantly, these effects emerge only for consumers who maintain relatively strong ties to their friends on the social network.

In study 1, one hundred sixty-nine Facebook users from an online panel participated. The study was comprised of three parts
that were disguised a separate studies. In the first part, participants answered several general questions about their Internet use including how close they are to their friends on Facebook, which served as a measure of tie strength. Next, participants were administered a website viewing task where they either browsed Facebook or a popular news website (CNN.com) for five minutes. Finally, respondents participated in an online auction for a new Apple iPad. As expected, participants submitted higher bids (i.e., displayed less spending control) during the auction after browsing Facebook compared to CNN.com. However, the effect emerged only in people with strong ties to their Facebook friends.

Study 2 was designed to rule out the possibility that Facebook use simply makes people more impulsive by examining how Facebook use influences persistence in an unsolvable anagram task, which is a more general measure of self-control (Vohs and Heatherton 2000). Additionally, we measured self-esteem after the task. As expected, participants with close ties to their Facebook friends gave up quicker at the unsolvable task after browsing Facebook. Conditional indirect effects analyses using a bootstrap method (Preacher, Rucker and Hayes 2007) found that the effect of browsing Facebook on persistence is mediated by self-esteem for those with strong ties to their Facebook friends.

The purpose of study 3 was to demonstrate that browsing a social network can lead people to adopt a narcissist mindset. Consequently, we had people browse or not browse Facebook before having them complete the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The findings demonstrate that those with strong ties to their Facebook friends report higher levels of narcissism after browsing Facebook. Conditional indirect effects analyses found that the effect of browsing Facebook on narcissism is mediated by self-esteem for those with strong ties to their Facebook friends.

In study 4, we examine the relationship between social network use and longer-term well-being. Five hundred forty-three Facebook users from an online panel covering the general population of U.S. Internet users participated in an online survey. They survey included several questions about social network use and behaviors related to poor self-control in eating and financial decision-making. The findings demonstrate that greater Facebook use is associated with a higher body-mass index (BMI), a greater likelihood of binge eating, more credit card debt and a lower credit score. However, the effect emerges primarily in people with close connections to their Facebook friends.

Social networks, such as Facebook, are now part of the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world. Indeed a number of psychological benefits can be derived from social network use. However, this research demonstrates that using a social network (Facebook) may have a detrimental effect on behavior by lowering consumers' self-control. These results are concerning given the increased time people spend using social networks, as well as the worldwide proliferation of access to social networks anywhere anytime (i.e., via mobile smartphones, smart TVs, tablet computers, etc.). Given that self-control is important for maintaining social order and personal well-being, this subtle effect could have widespread impact. This is particularly true for adolescents and young adults who are the heaviest users of social networks and have grown up using social networks as a normal part of their daily lives.

The Facebook Effect: Are Judgments Influenced by the Knowledge That Others Are Also Evaluating?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As web-based social networks proliferate, companies increasingly rely on virtual social communities to conduct market research and promote products. To encourage participation, companies often inform respondents that members of their virtual community are also evaluating the same products (“100 of your friends are also participating in this survey”). The present work examines how the knowledge of virtual others influences judgments. Specifically, we propose that the mere knowledge of virtual others highlights the uncertainty in the correctness of judgment (compared with social norm or consensus). The decrease in confidence, in turn, activates a need to conform and thus systematically reduces the extremity of judgments.

Results of four experiments provided support for this hypothesis in various domains including financial forecasting, movie box office revenues, and art work. Unlike previous research on social influence, we developed a new paradigm that allows us to test how knowledge of virtual others influences judgments without having to provide any consensus information to respondents. This feature increases the generality of our work as this information is often difficult to verify or observe in virtual communities.

To test the effect of virtual others, we first conducted a field experiment on Facebook. Participants were recruited into a social community on Facebook and asked to participate in a trivia game in which they were asked to estimate future and past events, including stock prices, currency exchange rate, and movie box-office revenues. In the virtual-other condition, we told participants that members of their community on Facebook were also participating in the study. In the control condition, we skipped this instruction. To demonstrate the role of need to conform, we added a consensus condition in which participants predicted the judgments of the members of the Facebook community about the same events. We offered performance-based incentives to control for effort and motivation. Consistent with our hypothesis, the results showed that participants in the virtual-other condition were less extreme (closer to the midpoint of the scale) in their estimation than were control participants. The results from the virtual-other condition also more closely tracked the perceived consensus than the results from the control condition, confirming the role of need to conform. Furthermore, we observed that participants in the virtual-other condition were less confident in the correctness of their estimation than were the control participants, which increased their need to conform to (perceived) consensus and reduced the extremity of judgments.

In study 2, we further tested the extremity hypothesis by manipulating the valence of judgment targets and using art work as the stimulus, which provides a conservative test for the effect of virtual others. Art is often perceived as a matter of personal taste and should be less prone to the need to conform. However, consistent with the Facebook study, we found that participants were less extreme in their evaluation of art work such that they were less positive about an attractive poster but more positive about an unattractive poster.

In the next two studies, we tested the moderating role of need to conform directly. Specifically, we manipulated need to conform by varying the similarity of members of a virtual community (peer vs. senior citizens; study 3) and activating a lay belief that being different from others is desirable or undesirable (study 4). Results of these two studies consistently showed that need for conformity is a key driver for the effect of virtual others. When participants perceived members of their virtual community as dissimilar to them (i.e., senior citizens) and thus need for conformity was low, or when
they were primed with a lay belief that conformity is undesirable, their judgments were as extreme as the control group. The similarity manipulation also allowed us to rule out priming as an alternative explanation. That is, if the knowledge of virtual others reduced judgment extremity by simply priming participants to behave in a way that was similar to their community members without increasing their motivation to conform, then exposure to senior citizens should cause participants to be more conservative in their financial forecasts as senior citizens often do. However, we found the opposite. Participants in the dissimilar (senior citizen) condition were as extreme in their forecasts as the control group. Further, in study 3, we tested the mediating effect of confidence. We found that the knowledge of virtual others reduced confidence in judgments, which mediated the extremity of judgments.

Our findings contribute to the literatures on social influence by extending the effect of need for conformity to virtual communities and examining the role of confidence in the mechanism that underlies the effect of virtual others. Imagine that a person, alone in a closed room, is evaluating a new product, advertisement, or another person. Clearly, whether or not a virtual community is also evaluating the same object has no bearing on whether and how this person would be judged by the community (it would not have access to his/her response), unlike when community members are physically present. However, across four studies, we found that the mere knowledge of virtual others reduces the extremity of judgments. As virtual social communities proliferate, the present research also raises important issues concerning potential biases in data collected via virtual social networks for academic researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. In the virtual world, consumer evaluations of delight or disgust may be dampened and reported as a mild liking or a mild disliking.

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