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Do instrumental goal pursuit mediate feelings of envy on Facebook and Happiness or subjective well-being?

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ABSTRACT

Different goal pursuits influence the valence of social networking sites (SNS) use, with some uses being more adaptive than others (e.g., aimless scrolling vs. communicating with friends). We use a model of happiness-increasing strategies on happiness and consider the mediating effect of Instrumental Goal Pursuit on the relationship of Envy to Happiness, or subjective well-being, in SNS use. Participants were drawn from an urban English college-level population. Partial least squares structural equation modeling was used to model relationships. Findings show that, in the context of SNS use, instrumental goal pursuit may not mediate the relationship between envy and happiness. Varying goal features may have a confounding effect on goal instrumentality in increasing happiness. Life satisfaction, purpose, personal circumstances, and personality differences likely have mediating effects on happiness and SNS use. Future studies should explore a more complete model that accounts for other antecedent factors including personality differences and life circumstance that have been shown to influence subjective wellbeing and likely mediate the relationship of instrumental goal pursuit relation to happiness.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social networking sites

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have reshaped how we connect to each other, and the initial promise of bringing people closer together has counter productively led to the atomization of the public sphere into filter bubbles (Bozdag & van den Hoven, 2015; DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017) and increased insularity as we associate with like-minded people and become disconnected from people who think differently from us (Turkle, 2011). FOMO, or the fear of missing out in internet speak, has been attributed to heightened feelings of depression and isolation as users are inundated with picture-perfect lives that create unattainable standards of happiness. Using social comparison theory, researchers (Krasnova, Widjaja, Buxmann, Wenninger, & Benbasat, 2015) have demonstrated that social media consumption is related to higher feelings of envy, defined as “unpleasant and often painful blend of feelings caused by a comparison with a person or group of persons who possess something we desire” (Smith & Kim 2007, p. 49). In her review, Fiske (2010) writes: “Related to jealousy, resentment, and injustice, envy is directed up, toward the rich, professional, and entrepreneurial but also toward peers and allies doing better than the self.

Envy is dangerous, dividing people in a different way than scorn does (p.703).” In the current context, it is salient to ask exactly what is the link between envy, happiness, or subjective well-being, and SNS use. However, studies have shown that the link is somewhat more complicated by the nature of the SNS use, as some uses may be more adaptive than others, as in the difference between passively viewing and actively participating, as two main modes of activity (Krasnova et al., 2015). Depression, loneliness, life satisfaction, anxiety personality differences have been connected to differences in SNS usage (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Krasnova et al., 2015). Barnett, Pearson, Pearson, and Kellermanns (2015) demonstrated that of the big five personality dimensions, conscientious, neuroticism, and extraversion were related to different perceptions and uses of an online course management system. Indeed, neuroticism is related to higher incidence of anxiety and depression.

User SNS interactions take myriad forms. They vary by the type of platform, the frequency of posting, time connected, and life factors which may influence the kind of use and ultimately, subjective feelings of wellbeing (Ahn, 2011). Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) examined Facebook usage among college students and found it positively correlated to life satisfaction, social trust, and civic engagement. Although, Goodman-Deane, Mieczakowski, Johnson, Goldhaber, and Clarkson

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(2016), comparing SNS to ten other forms of communication, found SNS negatively correlated with life satisfaction. However, the strength of satisfaction with relationships depended on the type of relationship, whether parent or friend. Others have shown that social media use is related to feelings of jealousy and dissatisfaction in relationships (Halpern, Katz, & Carril, 2017).

Instrumental goal pursuit—acting as an agent attempting to change her situation (e.g., “Strive to accomplish things”) or herself (e.g., “Attempt to reach full potential” (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006, p. 211)—may influence users' subjective feeling of wellbeing and mitigate feelings of envy and more maladaptive uses that lead to heightened feelings of life dissatisfaction and loneliness, but this has not been extensively studied. However, feelings of loneliness appear to be reduced, while happiness and life satisfaction are increased, by the use of an image-based social network platform (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram) versus text-based platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) that prove ineffectual on these measures (Pittman & Reich, 2016). While Davis (2013) explored the mediating effect of friendships, online communication, and self-concept clarity, and found that friendship quality mediated the relationship between online communication and self-concept, and online communication influenced both self-concept clarity and friendship quality. Thus, it appears that different goal pursuits could influence the valence of SNS use, with some uses more adaptive than others (e.g., aimless scrolling vs. communicating with friends).

In SNS use, the link between envy and happiness is likely mediated by user personal characteristics and pattern of engagement. We focus on the mediating effect of instrumental goal pursuit on the relationship between envy and happiness. Studies have shown that positive affect and subjective well-being are linked to goal setting and achievement (Ehrlich, 2012; Páez, Martínez-Sánchez, Mendiburo, Bobowik, & Sevillano, 2013; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Thus, we inquire whether the link between envy and happiness using SNS is mediated by instrumental goal pursuit.

1.2. Trait and state happiness

Happiness, or subjective well-being (Ehrlich, 2012; Lauriola & Iani, 2017; Nima, 2012; Páez et al., 2013; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006), is influenced by traits such as personality and mood and affect regulating strategies such as goal pursuit. We generally accept that traits can influence affect. Yet, we observe that some individuals seek out situations and adopt strategies to induce positive affect. McCrae and Costa (1991) proposed two paths: temperamental and instrumental. Temperamental such that neuroticism increases unhappiness and extraversion, happiness. In this view, traits predispose to certain moods. Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) found support for both instrumental and temperamental paths in the use of happiness-promoting strategies. Notably, extraversion appears influenced by a number of happiness-promoting strategies, whereas neuroticism, tends to make less use of strategies, focusing on mental control, and appears to have the opposite effect.

In the instrumental perspective, traits influence instrumental behaviors that in turn produce congruent affect, such as extroverts seeking out social activities that positively influence mood. Indeed, research has shown how particular volitional behaviors, such as happiness-increasing strategies, appear to moderate the relation between dispositions and well-being (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Further, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) noted that up to 40% of the variance in individual differences in happiness is not accounted for by traits and instead may result from individual strategies and behaviors. Strategies for self-regulation of moods have been documented as well as their consequences on well-being and satisfaction (Páez et al., 2013; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) derived eight factors of happiness strategies among college students. These factors were social affiliation, partying and clubbing, mental control, instrumental goal pursuit, passive leisure and active leisure, religion, and direct attempts. All positively correlated with happiness except passive leisure (none) and mental control (negative). Their regression analyses showed that happiness-increasing strategies accounted for a sizeable portion of the variance in individual differences in happiness levels. Strategies accounted for more variance (52%) than personality traits (46%) and accounted for an important amount of variance in happiness (16%) after controlling for the contribution of personality. The strongest predictors of happiness, controlling for other strategies, were mental control (inversely related), direct attempts, social affiliation, religion, partying, and active leisure. In the multiple regression model, passive leisure and instrumental goal pursuit did not contribute independently to happiness. The majority of the mediation models showed significant improvement with the inclusion of the happiness-promoting strategies, except partying that appeared to negatively moderate the relationship between extraversion and happiness. Neuroticism was least affected by strategies, except the inversely related mental control. Their findings on happiness-promoting strategies among a college student population mirrors work conducted on affect and mood regulation (Páez et al., 2013).

1.3. Research question

As mentioned earlier, there are multiple factors of happiness strategies. We elected to focus on and test for instrumental goal pursuit as this factor appears to be the most frequently used strategy by college students (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006, p. 195). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how instrumental goal pursuit influenced happiness through envy on SNS (Facebook) use. Our research question was phrased as follows: Does instrumental goal pursuit mediate feelings of envy on Facebook on users' subjective well-being?

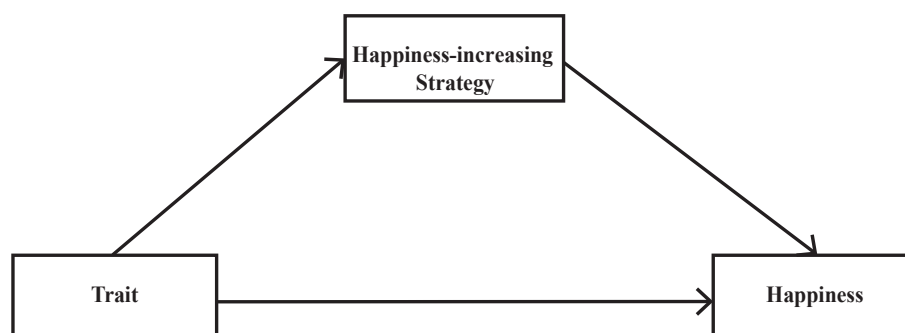


Fig. 1. Tkach and Lyubomirsky's (2006) process model of the relation of a trait to happiness mediated by happiness-increasing strategy.

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