



Full length article

# Facebook friends, subjective well-being, social support, and personality

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## ABSTRACT

Offline social capital in the form of interpersonal networks is known to be associated with subjective well-being (SWB). In two studies run in the US ( $N = 153$ ) and Germany ( $N = 187$ ), we initially investigated whether the size of an individual's Facebook social network was associated with SWB and perceived social support. Objectively measured Facebook network size was positively associated with several measures of both self- and informant rated SWB but not with perceived social support. More pertinent to the present research, we next investigated whether the observed associations between network size and SWB were, in fact, an artifact of personality – trait Extraversion in particular. Indeed, self- and informant-rated Extraversion was associated with both Facebook social network size and with self- and informant-rated SWB. Importantly, controlling for Extraversion rendered the associations between Facebook social network size and SWB weak and statistically insignificant. We discuss the importance of social relationships on Facebook for well-being, as well as the implications of our results for research on the relationship between SWB, social network size, and personality.

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## 1. Introduction

The scientific literature on happiness or subjective well-being (SWB) – people's affective and cognitive evaluations of their lives – has witnessed a remarkable growth in the last three decades (Diener, 2013). A key finding that has emerged from this literature has been that interpersonal relationships and social capital are strongly associated with SWB. Not only do ties to friends, family, neighbours, workplace ties, and civic engagement lead to SWB (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004), but the opposite may also be true – well-being may lead to better social relationships (e.g., Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). The importance of social relationships for SWB can help understand the huge interest in Internet social networking sites (SNS), which have provided new tools for fostering pre-existing social ties and creating new ones. Although an initial batch of studies reported an association between Internet use and decline in social involvement as well as an increase in loneliness and depression (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998), fears of the Internet producing a generation of social isolates (e.g.,

Cornish, 2006) turned out to be unfounded (e.g., Kraut et al., 2002). By contrast, a large scale longitudinal study by Wang and Wellman (2010) showed that number of friends in America increased from 2002 to 2007, and that heavy users of internet had the most friends, both off-line and on-line. Wang and Wellman (2010) went on to suggest that the growing number of friends in America was linked to the proliferation, popularity, and penetration of SNSs.

The most popular SNS, Facebook, has around 1.4 billion monthly active users, of whom almost ninety percent use Facebook mobile products (Facebook Newsroom, 2014). It allows users to create a network of people with whom they wish to share profile information, photos, comments, status updates, news etc. Especially now that mobile phones have bridged the gap between off-line and on-line worlds (Nylander & Larshammer, 2012) it may make little sense to see these worlds as distinct in any meaningful way. Indeed, the evidence supporting the idea that off-line and on-line worlds have converged is mounting: those who are liked in real-life tend also to be liked on-line (Weisbuch, Ivicevic, & Ambady, 2009), those who use Facebook more often possess more social capital (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010), Facebook profiles reflect actual personality, not self-idealization (Back et al., 2010), and Facebook behavior influences real-life behavior (Bond et al., 2012), to name only a few examples.

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Considering, on the one hand, the empirical evidence suggesting a strong association between social relationships and SWB, and, on the other hand, the extent to which social media has been incorporated into people's everyday lives, one would expect social relationships in social media to be strongly associated with SWB. Indeed, Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014) reported on a positive association between number of Facebook friends and ratings of happiness and life satisfaction (for similar results, see e.g., Kim & Lee, 2011; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). However, Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014) went on to show that number of Facebook friends was not associated with well-being when controlling for the personality trait Extraversion, and, based on this result, argued that Extraversion, at least in Finland, underlies both number of Facebook friends and well-being.

Building on the study by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014), the present research sought to more carefully investigate the associations between number of friends, SWB, and personality, Extraversion in particular, and to do so in two new cultural contexts, the US and Germany. Firstly, as acknowledged by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014), their measures of happiness and life satisfaction were far from ideal. Both of these constructs were measured with a single very short item, suggesting that responses are likely to have (a) been characterized by a non-trivial amount of random measurement error, and (b) been biased by response styles such as response acquiescence. Such factors would be expected to decrease the validity of the measures and thereby attenuate any associations between these measures and more objectively assessed variables (e.g., number of Facebook friends). Furthermore, single items cannot adequately capture the breadth of complex constructs such as SWB, commonly thought to exhibit a hierarchical structure comprising both cognitive and affective components, the latter of which can be further divided into positive and negative components. Although each of these components reflects people's evaluations of their lives, they show some degree of independence and should be assessed individually (e.g., Andrews & Whithey, 1976; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). For instance, high income improves cognitive evaluations of life but not emotional well-being (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). It therefore seems plausible to assume that number of Facebook friends could, even when controlling for Extraversion, be associated with aspects of SWB not assessed by the two single-item measures of SWB administered by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014). In the present study, we employed a rigorously validated measure of overall SWB, as well as separate measures of the cognitive and affective components of SWB, the latter assessed with separate scales for positive and negative affect.

Secondly, Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014) acknowledged that their results may have been confounded by method bias because both assessments of personality and assessments of SWB were based on self-ratings. This means that common method variance – due to e.g., respondents' response styles, consistency motives, or implicit theories – is likely to have strengthened the association between ratings of personality and ratings of SWB (for a review on method biases, see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). In fact, common method variance could explain why the predictive power of objectively measured number of Facebook friends on self-ratings of SWB was undermined by self-ratings of personality. To remedy this, we included in Study 2, in addition to self-ratings of SWB and personality, also multiple informant-ratings of SWB and personality. This should eliminate common method variance (e.g., positivity bias) from the associations between personality and SWB, thereby allowing a more evenhanded comparison of personality and number of Facebook friends as predictors of SWB. Besides methodological issues, also supporting the use of informant-ratings to complement self-ratings are results suggesting that in some domains others may know us better than we know

ourselves (for a review, see Vazire & Carlson, 2011).

Thirdly, we further expanded upon the original study by employing a measure of social support – number of Facebook friends was not only expected to be associated with various aspects of SWB, but also with the experience of receiving social support. The results of a recent study on an off-line social network suggested that network characteristics, such as number of friends, are related to SWB primarily via the mediation of perceived social support (Zhu, Woo, Porter, & Brzezinski, 2013).

The fourth reason for conducting the present research stems from the current replicability crisis in psychology (Pashler & Wagenmakers, 2012). Already well before this crisis, and consistent with the general view that social psychologists' knowledge-claims should be understood as historical artifacts rather than timeless truths (for the origins of this perspective, see Gergen, 1973), effects obtained in one culture have for some time been known often not to replicate in other cultures (e.g., Amir & Sharon, 1987). Most pertinent to the present research, the determinants of well-being are known to vary across cultures (e.g., Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999; Sorthieix & Lönnqvist, 2014). The study reported on by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014) was conducted in Finland and the participants were all Finnish. Similarly to the inhabitants of other Nordic welfare states, the Finns show exceptionally high levels of trust in public institutions (Oorschot, Arts, & Gelissen, 2006). Satisfaction with the public goods that such institutions provide is known to predict well-being (Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener, 2012). Having one's basic needs – the fulfillment of which is an essential determinant of well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004) – guaranteed by public institutions could make people less dependent on their social networks, undermining the importance of social ties for well-being. Indeed, a recurrent critique on the welfare state is that its social expenditures and comprehensive social programs 'crowd out' informal caring relations and social networks, as well as familial, communal, and occupational systems of self-help and reciprocity (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Wolfe, 1989). Therefore, we thought it important to assess the generalizability of the results reported on by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014) in more typical North-American and European settings – it seems possible that the associations between well-being and the size of one's social network would be stronger in countries with a less developed welfare system. The present research was run in the US (Study 1) and in Germany (Study 2).

To summarize, the present research sought to extend upon the research reported on by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014) by (a) employing a diverse set of rigorously validated SWB measures tapping into both cognitive and affective components of well-being, with the latter divided into separate measures of positive and negative affect, (b) eliminating the methodological biases and confounds involved in exclusively relying on self-report measures, (c) including a measure of social support as an additional outcome variable, and (d) assessing cross-cultural generalizability beyond a Nordic welfare context. Our hypotheses built on the results reported on by Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2014). First, we expected number of Facebook friends to be associated with all of our SWB measures (Hypothesis 1; the current literature did not allow for more specific hypotheses regarding which aspects of SWB could be expected to be most strongly connected to number of Facebook friends). Second, we expected number of Facebook friends to be positively associated with perceived social support (Hypothesis 2). Regarding this hypothesis, please note that we did not seek to test a mediation model in which number of friends would lead to heightened social support, which in turn would lead to higher well-being (as argued by Zhu et al., 2013); our reason for not testing mediation models was the growing consensus that mediation analyses with unmanipulated mediators cannot appropriately test

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