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Demographic and psychosocial variables associated with good and bad perceptions of social media use

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ABSTRACT

Social Exchange Theory suggests that adults evaluate good and bad consequences of social relationships they experience, so the present study expected them to also report good and bad perceptions of social media, with perceptions varying according to demographic and psychosocial characteristics. Study participants included 201 working adults (74.6% women; 90.0% Caucasian; mean age = 44.8 years) who completed online surveys to report demographics (gender, age, children, work hours, health problems), psychosocial variables (anger, self-esteem, job satisfaction, family support, friend support), and perceptions of good and bad consequences of using social media. ANCOVAs to examine demographic variables revealed that good perceptions of social media were most reported by younger individuals, and bad perceptions of social media were reported most by younger individuals and those with health problems. Multiple regression analyses to examine psychosocial variables revealed that good perceptions of social media were reported most by angry individuals with strong friend support, and bad perceptions of social media were reported most by angry individuals with low self-esteem. One interpretation of present results is that individuals use social media as a coping behavior to release anger and gather social support, although it may also produce social criticism, feeling left out, and reduced self-esteem.

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram) are being increasingly utilized by the adult population to serve a variety of social functions (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Roughly 74% of adult internet users now have at least one social media profile (Pew Research Center, 2015), and 52% are currently maintaining multiple profiles, up from 42% in 2013 (Duggan et al., 2015). Furthermore, among adult internet users aged 50—64 and 65+, 63% and 56% now use at least one social media platform, respectively (Duggan et al., 2015). Despite the rapidly growing prevalence of social media use by adults and an increasingly robust social media literature, a dearth of research dealing with adults' perceptions of social media remains. Scholarship in this area is thereby warranted.

2. Theoretical background and rationale

2.1. Social media and social exchange theory

Social media, also known as "social networking sites," are online member-based communities (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009) whereby members can create personal profiles in order to form and maintain social ties, create social and professional networks, and view and/or share information, ideas, and opinions (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). Many similarities exist between individuals' online and offline social behaviors and their outcomes. For example, self-disclosure has been associated with relationship development on social media (Steijn & Schouten, 2013) and in other social contexts (see review from Collins & Miller, 1994). Also, as age increases, social network size decreases, with this pattern being documented in both online (Brandtzaeg, 2012; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009) and offline contexts (Huxhold, Fiori, & Windsor, 2013). Consistencies also exist between online and offline gender differences in social behavior. Females tend to engage in more relationship maintenance and family activity, and place more emphasis on self-presentation when using social media (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012; Tifferet &

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Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014), whereas males are more likely to engage in behaviors that convey their social status (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014). Yet another example of similarities between online and offline social experiences lies in the benefits derived from social capital. Social capital refers to the wide range of resources that can be drawn from ones' relationships with others (Coleman, 1988). In the context of social media, research has revealed that Facebook use was positively associated with motivations for social capital, access to resources, and peer support (Ellison et al., 2007; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014; Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jafaar, 2015).

The above consistencies between individuals' online and offline social behaviors and motives suggest that theory developed to explain perceptions of offline social behavior may also be useful for understanding perceptions of social media behavior. Indeed, past research has taken such an approach. For example, Allam, Blustein, Bliemel, and Spiteri (2012) found that social media users had more favorable attitudes toward information sharing via "tagging" when they believed it led to their own productivity and the reciprocation of information from others. Additionally, Charoensukmongkol (2014) found a negative relationship between employees' social media use at work and perceived supervisor support. They suggested that employees may be more motivated to engage in behaviors that benefit the organization when they feel that their supervisors are supportive than when perceived supervisor support is lacking. Thus, there is evidence suggesting that attitudes toward social media use, in part, are influenced by users' perceptions of the associated costs and benefits. Therefore, the present study adopts Social Exchange Theory (SET, Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) as a guiding framework. SET proposes that adults tend to evaluate the good and bad consequences of social relationships they experience. Previous research suggests they may do the same for social media. The purpose of the present study was to examine demographic and psychosocial characteristics associated with good and bad perceptions of social media.

2.2. Demographic variables associated with social media use

The specific demographic variables considered in the present study for their association with good and bad perceptions of social media were selected because of past research documenting their association with the extent of social media use. For example, past research has consistently found an association between younger age and social media use (e.g. Barker, 2012; Correa, Hinsley, & Zuniga, 2010; De Cock et al., 2014; Haight, Quan-Hasse, & Corbett, 2014; Kontos, Emmons, Puleo, & Viswanath, 2010; McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Pfeil et al., 2009). Additionally, research has found age differences in the manner in which social media platforms are used. For example, McAndrew and Jeong (2012) noted that older users of Facebook engaged in more family activity than younger users, while Pfeil et al. (2009) found that younger users of Myspace tended to use the wider range of functions offered by social media, had larger friend networks, made more self-references, and had more similarly-aged Myspace friends than older users. Gender differences in social media use have also been established in the published literature, with females consistently reporting higher levels of social media use (Acar, 2008; McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Thompson & Lougheed, 2012). Finally, social media are increasingly used as a platform for sharing health-related information (Hether, Murphy, & Valente, 2014), with individuals experiencing a variety of psychiatric, neurological, and physical health problems shown to use social media for social support and information related to their health experiences (Antheunis, Tates, & Nieboer, 2013; Davis, Anthony, & Pauls, 2015; Mazurek, 2013; Thackery, Crookston, & West, 2013). Finally, because individuals using social

media may also use it to describe their children's accomplishments or workplace challenges, number of children and weekly work hours were also included in the present study as possible demographic variables associated with good and bad perceptions of social media use.

2.3. Psychosocial variables associated with social media use

The present study's selection of psychosocial variables considered for their association with social media perceptions were guided by the Threat Appraisal and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The theory proposes that adults respond to stressors they experience with a variety of coping behaviors, some of which may be considered "maladaptive" because they make the person feel better immediately but worsen the stressors, and some of which may be considered "adaptive" because they both make the person feel better immediately and reduce the stressors. Examples of such coping behaviors may include the following: (1) Becoming angry, either outwardly expressed or repressed and hidden from other people, (2) "Re-thinking" the stressor to minimize its apparent importance, such as by focusing on one's self-worth or job satisfaction, and (3) Seeking social support from family and friends to validate that one's anger is justified, or to gain information or practical assistance to reduce the stressor.

In support of these psychosocial variables considered by the present study for their association with social media perceptions (anger, self-esteem, job satisfaction, family support, friend support), past research has documented that many individuals use social media to protest and express anger about their social environments (Crawford, 2009; Lee, 2011; Martin, Coyier, VanSistine, & Schroeder, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013). Also, self-esteem has been frequently found associated with social media use, but with some studies showing that high self-esteem is associated with more social media use (Ghosh & Dasgupta, 2015; Whitman & Gottdiener, 2015), and other studies showing that low self-esteem is associated with more social media use (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013). Additionally, past research has documented an association between perceived social support and social media use (Charoensukmongkol, 2014; Oh et al., 2014), so strong family or friend social support may also be associated with the value perceived for social media.

3. New features and hypotheses

3.1. New features of the present study

One new feature of the present study was that it extended available research to a consideration of predictors of good and bad perceptions of social media, rather than just predictors of the frequency of using social media. Another new feature of the present study was that it extended consideration of social media perceptions to working adults, rather than just teens and young adults as emphasized in past research.

3.2. Hypotheses

3.2.1. Demographic variables

Because age, gender, and health problems have often been found in past research to be associated with the frequency of social media use (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Thompson & Lougheed, 2012; Thackery et al., 2013, respectively), we hypothesized that these demographic variables would also be found associated in the present study with stronger good and bad perceptions of social media.