Full length article

# Understanding online regret experience using the theoretical lens of flow experience

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Recent research has emphasized the exponential increase in the online regret experience among online users. Such experience results in poor satisfaction, brand switching, and even service discontinuity. However, little prior research has investigated the relative influence of online platform characteristics and individual differences (such as demographics) in predicting the online regret experience. To address this gap, a pen-and-paper cross-sectional survey was organized with 804 adolescent (aged 13–17 years) Facebook users. The study utilized a theoretical framework of flow experience to understand the online regret experience and investigated the relative influence of demographic variables (age, gender, time spent, and service use experience) and flow experience components in predicting the online regret experience. Older adolescents and those spending more daily time on Facebook were more likely to experience higher online regret than their younger counterparts and those spending less daily time on Facebook. There were no significant gender-related or Facebook use experience-related differences in the tendency to experience online regret. The increase in playfulness and users' focused attention on Facebook led to higher levels of online regret experience. The practical and theoretical implications of this study for both practitioners and researchers are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The Internet enables young people to play, learn, and socialize. However, use of the Internet has led to an exponential increase in the occurrence of the regret experience by adolescents in recent decades (Stern, 2015). Regret is defined as a "negative, cognitively based emotion" which people experience when they realize or imagine that their present situation or condition would have been better if they had acted differently (Zeelenberg, 1999). Regret leads to a bad or negative experience since people tend to blame themselves for their actions which result in a regret experience (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). The possible reasons behind "experiencing online regret" include the infinite life expectancy, fast redistribution, and easy duplication of online communications (boyd & Marwick, 2009). Examples of the online regret experience include sharing certain content online which attracts negative criticism from peers and leads to victimization, sharing personal online content with an unintended audience, and sharing one's own views about a certain topic online due to which offline relationships (both professional and personal) are affected. Prior literature has suggested that the presence of regret has a negative influence on users' satisfaction (Taylor, 1997; Bui, Krishen, & Bates, 2011; Kang, Hong, & Lee, 2009; Inman, James, & Jianmin, 1997) and repurchase intention (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000). Furthermore, the regret experience can affect a user's decision to continue using a particular service (Kang et al., 2009; Lemon, White, & Winer, 2002).

According to the popular press, the percentage of young people experiencing online regret is increasing at an alarming rate (Tucker, 2009). Different consumer behavior studies have suggested varying percentages of young people experiencing regret online. For example, 11%–46% of young people has reported experiencing regret after an online post (Common Sense Media, 2009; Family Online Safety Institute, 2012; Marist Poll, 2011; Yahoo, 2011; Madden, 2012). Similarly, 40% of young college students has

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experienced online regret after sharing online self-portrayal (Stern, 2015).

The majority of the prior research concerning regret experiences has addressed consumer decision making (Taylor, 1997; Tsiros & Mittal, 2000; Bui et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2009; Lemon et al., 2002; Inman et al., 1997) and understanding the role of counter-factual thinking, feedback, and cognitive and behavioral aspects of regret regulation for establishing the concept of regret in real life (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, & Manstead, 1998; Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2007; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007; McConnell et al., 2000; Su, Chen, & Zhao, 2008; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, van der Pligt, Manstead, van Empelen, & Reinderman, 1998; Zeelenberg, 1999; Inman, 2007; Giorgetta et al., 2013). In comparison, computer-mediated communication researchers have recently begun to examine the reasons and consequences of experiencing online regret. However, to date, only a few empirical studies have been undertaken with the aim of understanding the conceptualization of the online regret experience. Hence, one can argue that research concerning "online regret" is still in its early stages. Many important questions concerning online regret remain unanswered: What online platform experiences condition or predict the online regret experience? How do online users differ from one another in terms of the level of regret they experience? What are the differences in the level of regret experienced by different online users? What are the demographic differences in the online regret experience? To answer these questions, the present cross-sectional study was conducted to understand the regret experience among adolescent social networking service (SNS) users (i.e., Facebook in the present study). Facebook is the dominant social networking platform among other available options with more than 1.55 billion monthly active users as of March 2015 (Facebook Statistics, 2015). It provides a naturalistic as well as an experimental platform for understanding user behavior (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Therefore, it was chosen for studying the online regret experience. Futhermore, the majority of the existing Facebook-related research is positivistic in nature. However, little research has been conducted on the problematic use of Facebook and its negative implications (e.g., online regret experience in the present study).

The present study examined how demographics and flow experience components are related to regret experienced when using Facebook. Furthermore, the study investigated the extent to which the key components of the flow experience in Facebook use and users' demographic variables predict the regret experience regarding Facebook use. Because human nature tends to avoid and suppress regret, it is important to understand the possible antecedents of the occurrence of regret when using online services such as Facebook. Understanding the factors that cause regret on Facebook can have theoretical implications for research and practical implications for organizations that have a presence on Facebook.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Adolescent facebook users

The use of Facebook has become extremely popular among adolescents (Hofstra, Corten, & Tubergen, 2015). Different studies have suggested varying percentages of adolescents using Facebook; for example, according to the latest Pew Internet research, 81% of adolescents had an SNS account, of which 94% used Facebook (Madden, 2012). Similarly, Lenhart (2015) concluded that 71% of adolescents was using Facebook. According to Lapowsky (2014), adolescents are early adopters of any product or service; thus, organizations consider them an important market segment. Futhermore, adolescents can play an important role in influencing the adoption of any brand, product, or service through their friends and family (Lapowsky, 2014). Consequently, different public and private sector organizations are interested in understanding adolescents' Facebook use-related behavior. In addition, organizations are interested in engaging adolescents through Facebook so as to build trust and prepare future loyal customers for their brand, services, or products. However, recent literature has emphasized that the adolescent demographic group is the least studied from the perspective of online user participation (see Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014). Similarly, adolescent online users have not yet been studied from the perspective of the online regret experience. Prior literature has suggested that adolescents possess little technical know-how for dealing with problems related to privacy threats and online risks (Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Livingstone, 2008). In addition, adolescents are less aware of how to behave in the online environment than their adult counterparts who are more highly trained, mature, and aware of the social rules, even for online space (Smahel & Wright, 2014; Piaget, 1970; Leontjev, 1978). For these reasons, prior research findings in the context of adults may no longer be valid in the case of adolescents.

### 2.2. Online regret experience and SNSs

The research covering the regret experience in online space has received attention only recently. Fundamental differences exist in the nature of regret experienced in real life compared to online space (i.e., the virtual world). For example, sophisticated norms and guidelines exist in the offline world, unlike in online space, that guide socialization and self-discourse-related practices (Wang et al., 2011). Online users often face difficulty in identifying the potential receivers of the information and content they share online, locating their audience, controlling the scope of content visibility, controlling their action in the virtual world, and even predicting the reaction of others to their recent online activity (Wang et al., 2011). For these reasons, it is plausible to assume that conditions, context, and consequences concerning the online regret experience differ from the real-life regret experience.

SNSs enable users to self-express, self-disclose, and establish new and strengthen existing social relationships. On one hand, self-disclosure results in close social relationships and higher quality well-being (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). On the other hand, online information disclosure can lead to embarrassment, social black-balling, and revictimization (Xu, Burchfiel, Zhu, & Bellmore, 2013). Prior literature has argued that most SNS users experience regret (Wang et al., 2011; Sleeper et al., 2013a, 2013b; Madden, 2012). For example, Moore and McElroy (2012) found that SNS users tend to disclose too much about their own personal life, which also leads to a regret experience at later stages. Furthermore, such regret can even result in the closing of one's Facebook account, commonly referred to as "Facebook suicide" (Justice, 2007). On experiencing regret, users often tend to avoid, suppress, and even regulate the elements of regret in a given situation (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2006) by, for example, deleting the posted information (e.g., status messages, videos, digital photos) after considering the different risks (e.g., embarrassment, ostracization, fear of retribution, impression or personal status management, emotional reasons, safety and security) (Child, Petronio, Agyeman-Budu, & Westermann, 2011; Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2012; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009).

The review of the prior empirical investigations concerning online regret in SNSs revealed that the majority of the studies consisted of US-based study samples representing undergraduate students (see Table 1). Research on the regret experience in the SNS context has focused on various domains including users' behavioral intentions (Kang et al., 2009), the role of user personality (Moore & McElroy, 2012), management strategies (Xu et al., 2013; Sleeper