



# Individual differences in social networking site users: The interplay between antecedents and consequential effect on level of activity



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## ABSTRACT

Based on the notion that individual users would utilize Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in characteristic ways, we tested a structural model hypothesizing that personality traits, communicative and social variables, attitudes, and motives would affect level of SNS activity. Participants ( $n = 674$ ) completed measures of personality, communication apprehension, self-esteem, need for affiliation, attitudes, motives of SNS use, and level of SNS activity. Results offered support for the hypothesized model of SNS motivations and activity, illustrating that SNSs were primarily used to maintain relational connections with others. In addition, support was found for the contention that SNSs offer beneficial social tools for all individuals; however, this effect was highest for individuals already proficient in face-to-face social and communicative behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are online communities that support social interaction by allowing individual users to maintain a network of connections and actively communicate and correspond with them (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). While instant messaging and email are typically used for dyadic and one-to-one interactions (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012), SNSs facilitate interaction on a one-to-many basis. The growth of social media has been meteoric, with Facebook – the most popular website in the world – claiming over a billion registered users worldwide in a span of less than a decade (Smith, Segal, & Cowley, 2012). This swift emergence calls for an examination of the communication processes that exist and operate through these channels and the motives behind their use.

Researchers have employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches when examining online social networking, while also looking at specific websites such as Facebook and MySpace (Banczyk, Krämer, & Senokozlieva, 2008; Foregger, 2009). In terms of SNS adoption and use, researchers have looked at individual variables such as reticence, self-esteem, extraversion and need for affiliation (Banczyk et al., 2008; Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010; Gangadharbatla, 2009; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2009).

Nevertheless, no over-arching view of SNS communicative behavior exists. Moreover, despite enabling social and communicative features on SNSs, there are conflicting findings on whom SNSs really benefit; Ellison et al. (2007) found that SNSs helped users overcome face-to-face (FtF) social barriers, thus supporting a “poor-get-rich” hypothesis. Others however, have found that SNSs merely benefit those who are already skilled in FtF social interaction, thus supporting the “rich-get-rich” hypothesis (Banczyk et al., 2008; Kraut et al., 2002). Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) for instance found that SNS use “stimulated the number of relationships formed on the site, the frequency with which adolescents received feedback on their profiles, and the tone (i.e., positive vs. negative) of this feedback” (p. 584).<sup>1</sup> These dual-effects conceptions beg the question – what motives and intentions drive an SNS user? In response to a gap in the computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature – and a call for researchers to investigate the characteristics of a typical SNS user (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) – the current study proposes a comprehensive analysis of (1) the personality and communicative traits of SNS users, (2) their attitudes and motivations for SNS use, and (3) the interplay between these antecedent blocks of variables on SNS activity.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors further noted that positive feedback on the profiles enhanced adolescents’ social self-esteem and well-being, whereas negative feedback decreased their self-esteem and well-being.

### 1.1. Dissecting the SNS user

One of the most active areas in SNS research involves the examination of motivations behind SNS use. Researchers have examined personality (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Langstedt, 2013; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), self-esteem (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), narcissism (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) and need for affiliation (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2009). However, there remains a dearth of research on the influence of these variables on user motivations and SNS activity. Thus, in an effort to explicate SNS activity, we begin with an examination of personality traits as antecedents.

### 1.2. Personality traits as antecedents

A key focus in media adoption research, the study of personality traits is commonly measured in psychology as a broad structure encompassed by dimensions or the “Big-Five” – extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Galauner, Pettay, Beatty, Rudd, & Atkin, 2011; Goldberg, 1993; Langstedt & Atkin, 2014; McCrae & Costa, 1999). The study of personality traits has been extended to examine various forms of CMC, including SNSs. Extraversion has consistently emerged as a driving force in relationship formation and maintenance on SNSs (Back et al., 2010); it has also been found to be significantly related to the size of one’s network and to level of activity and self-presentation on SNSs (Acar, 2008; Krämer & Winter, 2008). Openness, which has been linked to experimenting with new forms of communication (Butt & Phillips, 2008) has been shown to be a significant predictor of SNS use (Banczyk et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2009). Based on the literature, which suggests that extraversion and openness are strong and consistent predictors of SNS use, the decision was made to incorporate only these two personality dimensions in the current study.

Conversely, Ross et al. (2009) maintain that researchers should not limit themselves to studying personality traits derived from the Big-Five schema (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Pearse (2013) argues, for instance, that social media are a stage for narcissism and preliminary research (Bergman et al., 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006) has uncovered a link between the two. Narcissism is characterized by an inflated self-concept, a sense of uniqueness and entitlement, and positive self-view of traits like intelligence and extraversion (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Emmons, 1987; John & Robins, 1994). In order to maintain their inflated sense of self, narcissists rely on multiple strategies including domineering and exhibitionist behaviors (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Since SNSs allow users to promote themselves in an ideal fashion through pre-selected information, they are an idyllic setting for narcissists to engage in exhibitionist and self-promoting behavior (e.g., Bergman et al., 2011).

### 1.3. Contradictory findings on self-esteem

Self-esteem has been at the center of conflicting findings regarding its effect on SNS behavior (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Valkenburg et al. (2006) found that SNS use had beneficial effects on users’ self-esteem and life satisfaction. Concurrently, Banczyk et al. (2008) showed that SNS users with high self-esteem were more likely to engage in positive self-presentation behaviors. Conversely, Krämer and Winter (2008) did not find any relationship between self-esteem and self-presentation behavior on SNSs. The inconsistency in findings regarding the effect of self-esteem thus deserves additional attention.

### 1.4. Communication and social influences

Communication apprehension (CA) refers to a trait-level and more recently state-like anxiety about communicating with other people (McCroskey & Beatty, 1984). CA is a variable of interest because researchers believe that mediated forms of communication allow people—particularly those with CA – a stress-free way to interact with others (Lemieux, 2007). Although there is some precedent in the SNS literature regarding computer-mediated CA (Hunt et al., 2012), research has yet to explore the impact of FtF CA on SNS use; thus we can only speculate on the effect of apprehension to communicate on consequential SNS behavior.

The primary purpose of most communication is to seek affiliation with others (e.g., Haferkamp and Krämer, 2009). The need to belong or affiliate with others in a social group is a defining characteristic of being human (Hill, 1987). This need for affiliation (NA) – to find friends and social support – has been used to explain motivations to join virtual communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). In fact, social affiliation is the most important motivating factor in using SNSs (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2009). Despite some evidence underscoring the importance of affiliative behavior on SNS use, there still remains a dearth of literature on this topic.

### 1.5. Examining the influence of attitudes

Technology-oriented and social scientific theories on media choice tend to look at the attributes of the medium or the encompassing social framework to explain people’s reasons for choosing certain media (Campbell & Russo, 2003; Irmer & Bordia, 2003), while ignoring the value of attitudes on possible media choice. With respect to SNSs, Gangadharbatla (2009) illustrated that attitudes significantly predict people’s willingness and intention to join SNSs, which in turn positively predict actual usage. Since positive attitudes towards a new communication technology are a key motivator in adoption (Carey, 1995; Lin & Atkin, 2014; Straub & Karahanna, 1998), it stands to reason that attitudes towards SNSs will influence motives for use and subsequent SNS behavior.

### 1.6. Towards a structural model of SNS motivations and activity

Based on the of the theoretical dynamics outlined in past work, we propose a model that seeks to explain the effect of antecedent variables such as personality and communication traits, need for affiliation, self-esteem, attitudes and motives in order to predict level of activity on SNSs. The structural model can be viewed as a series of five blocks – personality traits, social and communication influencers, attitudinal variables, motives, and finally SNS activity. The model predicts that level of activity will be directly influenced by female gender – initially a predictor of SNS use (Hunt et al., 2012; Sheldon, 2008; Sheldon, 2009) – although this gender gap has leveled over time and leaves its valence in question (Lin & Atkin, 2014).<sup>2</sup> SNS use is also posited to be influenced by extraversion, NA, attitudes towards SNSs, and motives for using SNSs. Due to a lack of consistent data, research questions are proffered about the relationship between female gender and personality traits. The second block of variables includes social and communicative motives – NA, CA and self-esteem. Based on the evidence mentioned above, extraversion will have a direct negative effect on CA, which in turn will mediate the effect of extraversion on self-esteem. Narcissism will positively influence NA; which in turn will be positively affected by gender. There is limited knowledge about the impact of

<sup>2</sup> Although masculinized gender gaps in Internet adoption have leveled over time, with women making even greater use of media like the telephone (Rogers, 1983), inconclusive findings in recent work auger against a clear predictive valence for gender (Langstedt, 2013).

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