



## Who interacts on the Web?: The intersection of users' personality and social media use

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### ABSTRACT

In the increasingly user-generated Web, users' personality traits may be crucial factors leading them to engage in this participatory media. The literature suggests factors such as extraversion, emotional stability and openness to experience are related to uses of social applications on the Internet. Using a national sample of US adults, this study investigated the relationship between these three dimensions of the Big-Five model and social media use (defined as use of social networking sites and instant messages). It also examined whether gender and age played a role in that dynamic. Results revealed that while extraversion and openness to experiences were positively related to social media use, emotional stability was a negative predictor, controlling for socio-demographics and life satisfaction. These findings differed by gender and age. While extraverted men and women were both likely to be more frequent users of social media tools, only the men with greater degrees of emotional instability were more regular users. The relationship between extraversion and social media use was particularly important among the young adult cohort. Conversely, being open to new experiences emerged as an important personality predictor of social media use for the more mature segment of the sample.

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### 1. Introduction

The Internet has profoundly changed the human experience. We use the Web to find information, buy and sell products, watch television shows, seek mates, search for entertainment, and participate in political spheres (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig, & Rojas, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, in press; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). We use it to connect with others – three-quarters of American adults have been online, with even more teens (93%) reporting they do so, and almost all Internet users say one of their primary purposes for going online is for communication (Jones & Fox, 2009). The Internet is part of our everyday lives, and who we are guides how we use it.

People once went online seeking the anonymity it offered (McKenna & Bargh, 2000); they now more often use the Internet to socialize with people they do know and expand their circle of friends (Jones, 2009). Two of the primary tools that enable these connections are social networking sites and instant messages (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Jones, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). More than half of America's teens and young adults send instant messages and use social networking sites, and more than one-third of all Internet users engage in these activities (Jones, 2009).

With millions of users worldwide, it raises the question of what types of people rely on these online social media tools in their interactions with others. Previous research has established three personality traits that are central to social media use: extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience (Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). People who are more open to experiences tend to be drawn to SNS (social networking sites), as are those with high levels of neuroticism. Individuals high in neuroticism, as well as people who are extraverted, also seem to have greater use of instant messages (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008).

However, these findings may not apply to the population at large. Previous studies examining personality and social media use were based on college-aged samples and did not explore the potential influencing effect of gender, nor did they control for the possible impact of life satisfaction and socio-demographic variables on users' dispositions (i.e. Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). This study seeks to expand the literature by investigating the relationship between personality and social media use and the effect of gender and age on that dynamic in a national sample of US adults.

#### 1.1. The role of social media use

This paper defines social media use as the particular consumption of digital media or Internet that has little to do with traditional informational media use. Rather, it provides a mechanism for the

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audience to connect, communicate, and interact with each other and their mutual friends through instant messaging or social networking sites. To our knowledge, the majority of research on social media use has solely focused on social networking sites (i.e. Ellison et al., 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). These sites are virtual collections of users' profiles, which can be shared with others to create lists of companions and maintain contact with them (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The lists illustrate each user's connections with others, whose profiles are accessible by individuals included on the list. Most users (nearly 90%) visit the sites to keep in touch with people they already know, and more than half have two or more profiles online (Lenhart, 2009). This paper also builds on this typology by including instant messaging as a standalone feature of available software on the Internet or as an embedded feature of SNS.

The predominant SNS users are young adults; three-quarters of adult Internet users under age 25 have a profile on a social networking site (Lenhart, 2009). The popularity of these sites is attracting more and more adult users. In 2005, only 8% of adult Internet users had an online profile; today, that number has quadrupled to 35% (Lenhart, 2009). Social networking site users are also regular visitors, with more than one-third checking their profile page daily and almost another 25% visit every few days. Among teens, these numbers are higher – almost half said they logged into their profile at least once a day and about one-third visit weekly. In one study of college students, males and females were equally likely to have profiles on social networking sites and were found to spend about three hours each day on the sites (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), while two studies reported the students limited themselves to an average of 10–30 min each day (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009).

Instant messaging has also been tied to social networking site use, especially among teens. Teens who have social network profiles are more likely than their non-profile using counterparts to send and receive instant messages, and to do so more often (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Today, this fact may be amplified for Internet users who seamlessly intertwine both behaviors through social networking sites, some of which allow the exchange of instant messages while logged onto the site. Across all adults online, roughly the same number use social networking sites and send instant messages, 35% and 38%, respectively (Jones, 2009). Older adults appear to be somewhat more comfortable using instant messaging over social networking sites.

These findings lead to questions of what factors may be driving the differences in individuals' use of social media tools like social networking sites and instant messaging.

### 1.2. Personality as a predictor of Internet and social media use

As the pool of research on Internet use grew, several scholars examined the influence of personality traits on Internet uses by utilizing the Five-Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The Big-Five framework is a model of personality that contains five factors representing personality traits at a broad level: extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Ehrenberg et al., 2008; John & Srivastava, 1999). Each factor is bipolar (e.g., extraversion vs. introversion) and summarizes various specific aspects (e.g., sociability), which in turn contain more specific traits (e.g., talkative, outgoing). This model suggests that the majority of individual differences in personality can be classified into these five broad domains (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003).

The line of research that has examined personality and Internet uses determined extraversion and neuroticism were significantly related to online activities (i.e. Amichai-Hamburger, 2002;

Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002). Early studies of individuals' online activities found those high in extraversion and low in neuroticism were not as heavy Internet users as their more introverted, more neurotic counterparts (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002). They hypothesized that the anonymity of the Internet attracted people who were less comfortable with themselves and who otherwise had trouble making connections with others. Gender differences in early studies of the Internet were also evident – introversion and neuroticism were higher among women who turned to the Internet for its social services, such as online chats and discussion groups (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000). Neuroticism, which can be manifested as loneliness, was again linked to women's Internet use in a 2003 study that posited that lonely women were drawn to the Internet perhaps as a means to reduce their loneliness (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003).

More recent studies, however, have reflected a reversal in the association between some types of Internet use and personality traits. This may be due in part because of the restrictions on anonymity in certain types of online applications, such as social networking sites. Most people use these sites to interact with individuals they already know, therefore limiting their engagements with strangers (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). As such, these sites may be more likely to appeal to extraverts. Similarly, whereas chat rooms allow group-like conversations between individuals who are largely unknown to each other, instant messaging is commonly used for communication between single users who are more familiar with each other (e.g., Quan-Haase, 2007).

In examining personality as a potential predictor of use of social networking sites, three of the five factors showed promise: extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience (Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). Extraverted individuals had many connections with others via social networking sites and in the "real world," and also tended to have higher self-esteem (Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). Another study of college students found the people who used the social networking site Facebook less frequently felt less satisfied with their lives, leading the authors to speculate the site could help individuals overcome low satisfaction and low self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2007). Ross et al. (2009) found extraversion was positively related to belonging to Facebook groups, but there was no association with how they communicated on the site. They speculated the lack of instant messaging available to Facebook users may not have fulfilled their desire for immediate contact. Facebook has since introduced an instant messaging application, suggesting extraversion may now be positively correlated with SNS use.

In the case of neuroticism, it was associated with instant messaging when compared to face-to-face interaction. People high in neuroticism had greater instant messaging use (Ehrenberg et al., 2008). The authors speculate this preference over face-to-face interaction was because the instant messaging permitted additional time to contemplate responses, making it easier for more neurotic people to communicate with others.

Finally, heavier users of social networking sites reported higher levels of openness to experience (Ross et al., 2009). High openness to experience is reflected in curiosity and novelty-seeking; low levels are evident in preferences for adhering to convention and established patterns (John & Srivastava, 1999). Because social networking sites are a relatively new application of Internet technology, it is expected that those who are more open to experiences would experiment with creating online profiles.

Based on the previous literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** People who are more extraverted will use social media more frequently.

This hypothesis is drawn from research that has found there is a propensity for people high in extraversion to be more regular users

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