



Exploring associations between young adults' facebook use and psychological well-being: A goal hierarchy approach



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ABSTRACT

There is scant research on the broader outcomes of IT in users' life contexts beyond adoption. This study uses a goal hierarchy approach to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the use of Facebook and psychological well-being (PWB) in young adults. The study applies a mixed-method design that combines means-end analysis and regression analysis to examine data collected from laddering interviews with 161 Facebook users. The means-end chain analysis provided knowledge of the hierarchical goal structure in Facebook (i.e., activities → mediated goals → ultimate goals). Regression analysis was used to identify the relationships between the ultimate goals of Facebook use (e.g., psychological stability, belongingness) and the dimensions of PWB (e.g., self-acceptance, autonomy). The findings explain the significant association of Facebook use with well-being and the dual outcomes of enjoyment (positive in SNS; negative in users' lives). Prior research focused on relationships among abstract factors, but this study delivers a more specific and nuanced explanation of user behavior on SNSs by providing knowledge of how specific Facebook activities relate to goals and PWB.

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1. Introduction

As information technology (IT) has become increasingly pervasive in the everyday lives of individuals, IT has truly become “personal.” In addition, the trend of user empowerment/user tailorability, characterized by a rich user experience, user self-configuration, and openness, has enabled IT users to have a much broader range of personalized experiences (Germonprez, Hovorka, & Collopy, 2007). The growing embeddedness of IT in users' lives and enhanced capabilities of personalization call for more extensive investigation of experiential computing involving the ordinary use of IT. It is important to understand the effects of IT use on human life, and the topic of “the nature and consequences of the digital mediation of everyday experiences” is considered an emerging domain of information systems (IS) research (Yoo, 2010, p. 220).

Although IT has become more influential in users' life, IS research still tends to examine a narrow range of IT impacts focusing on consequences regarding tasks or systems, rather than examining its holistic effect on human living (Choi, Lee, Lim, & Kim, 2007). The outcomes of using IT, which have been traditionally

examined, have been largely limited to the context of system use itself, such as usage intention, system satisfaction, and intention to return (Bhattacharjee & Premkumar, 2004; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1992; van der Heijden, 2004). Prior research on IT use largely regards adoption itself as the ultimate goal (e.g. Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). This predisposition may not only hinder a holistic understanding of the impact of IT use, but also limit the expansion and diversity of IS research areas. More focus needs to be placed on the comprehensive outcomes of IT use and the relationship between the processes of IT use and its comprehensive consequences.

To gain a better understanding of personal IT consequences, the research coverage may need to be extended to the broad context of daily life beyond user adoption. Nowadays, IT use is related to meeting a broader and deeper range of users' needs than performance improvement (Yoo, 2010), and the daily use of IT has the potential to proceed to the ultimate human goal of well-being. In the current study, we focus on one of the most commonly used applications today, social networking sites (SNSs),¹ which have become a part of everyday social interaction for many (Lin & Utz, 2015).

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¹ 1.79 billion people use SNSs worldwide, and 73 percent of the population in the United States use SNSs (<http://www.statista.com/topics/1164/social-networks/>)

As social media use has exploded in popularity, researchers have turned their attention to questions concerning the psychological costs and benefits of SNS use (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Examples of benefits identified in prior studies are experiencing decreased depressive symptoms (Wright et al., 2013) and receiving social and emotional support (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013) and happiness (Lin & Utz, 2015). Examples of psychological costs are being victimized by cyberbullying (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), addictive behavior (Turel, Serenko, & Giles, 2011), social distress (Chiou, Lee, & Liao, 2015), and fatigue, or “technostress” (Salanova, Llorens, & Cifre, 2013). Given the wide range of psychological states that can be associated with social media use, one high-priority avenue of research is work directed towards deepening our understanding of the relationship between SNS use and well-being (Chen & Lee, 2013; Chiu, Cheng, Huang, & Chen, 2013; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Some of these studies posit a one-directional causal relationship between use and psychological well-being (PWB), indicating the degree of meaningfulness in life (e.g. Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009), while other research perspectives assume a more complex, reciprocal relationship between the two factors (e.g. Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009).

Even though the relationship between SNS use and PWB has been explored in a number of studies, there is still much to learn. One major challenge has been to reconcile findings that report positive associations between use and well-being with findings showing negative associations. This conundrum has prompted more in-depth studies for understanding the various social and psychological mechanisms that may be linked to SNS use. Chen and Lee (2013), for example, developed a model incorporating Facebook interaction, communication, and self-esteem with psychological distress. Another recent example is a study by Kim and Hancock (2015) using the concept of optimistic bias to understand how the way individuals perceive themselves as subject to the positive and negative outcomes of Facebook use may influence their perceptions of the likelihood that they and others will experience potential risks and benefits, as well as the implications of these perceptions. With the same broad goal as these studies, the purpose of the exploratory research reported in this paper is to provide new insights into the complex relationship between SNS use and PWB.

Our research takes a novel approach by identifying the high-level goals sought by SNS users and exploring the relationships between these goals and each of the dimensions in the model of psychological well-being developed by Ryff and colleagues (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1996; Ryff, 1989). This follows observations on Internet use and the user’s PWB suggesting that this relationship is dependent on the particular goals that users have in their use in interaction with the unique qualities of the communication mode (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Our study is the first to adopt a goal-based orientation for examining this relationship specifically for SNS use.

Two broad research questions frame the investigation. The first is “What goals do users seek in their use of Facebook,² and how are these goals related?” A goal indicates a desired outcome of an action (Locke & Latham, 1990). To examine this question, we follow the widely accepted perspective on human goals that they are hierarchically organized, with each goal located between its subordinate goal and superordinate goal (Newell & Simon, 1972). Based on this assumption, we adopt the means-end analysis approach for the investigation. The advantage of this analytical approach is that it enables us to identify how individuals’ goals for Facebook use are organized along a means-end chain. SNSs enable users to

achieve a diversity of goals, which may have complicated relations among them as well as to psychological well-being. According to the argument of goal hierarchies (Locke & Latham, 1990), these diverse SNS goals may be hierarchically organized. A means-end chain approach based on the view of a hierarchical structure of human goals (Gutman, 1982) enables us to investigate the ways in which SNS activities are a means to achieve goals, which are subsequently means to more abstract goals, which in turn may be related to the abstract dimensions of psychological well-being.

The second, follow-on research question is “How are users’ high-level goals in the use of Facebook associated with their psychological well-being?” We employ the concept of PWB, indicating self-fulfillment of well-being rather than overall satisfaction- and affection-based well-being, which has been criticized as leaning toward a hedonic aspect of quality of life (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Regression analysis is used to examine the relationship between users’ high-level goals for Facebook use and each of the six dimensions of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Data collected from Facebook users was analyzed for both the means-end chain and regression analyses.

In particular, we explored two research questions in the context of *digital natives*, who are in their 20s and 30s and have grown up with information technologies and are familiar with digital environments (Prensky, 2001). Digital technologies are deeply embedded in their daily living; thus, these technologies may be more interrelated with young adults’ quality of life than that of seniors. By investigating the relationships between their Facebook use and PWB, this study explores the associations between digital environments and young adults’ quality of life.

There are two particular reasons why we selected young adults as a subject of investigation. Young adults are regarded as a main user segment in terms of the number of users and the amount of daily time spent with Facebook. The 20s age group corresponds to 28 percent of Facebook users, and the 30s age group accounts for 21 percent of users in the USA.³ These two age groups represent half of all Facebook users. In addition, users in their 20s and 30s are a group who stay on Facebook longer than any other age groups.⁴ Accordingly, young adults are regarded as a leading user group of Facebook (Chaffey, 2016). The other reason is that well-being is particularly important for young adults. Because young adults lack “the psychological resources of maturity and experience,” they are vulnerable to stressful situations (Jackson & Finney, 2002 p. 186). In particular, their stress can be triggered by their identity confusion, which lessens their psychological well-being (Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008). Recently, increasing unemployment among young adults has caused them serious distress (Reneflot & Evensen, 2012). Psychological well-being is therefore an important issue for young adults. Young adults’ Facebook use may be associated with their well-being in that 91 percent of Millennials, or those aged 15 to 34, use Facebook (Smith, 2016). For this reason, we selected young adults in their 20s and 30s and examine how their Facebook use is associated with their psychological well-being.

As the initial study of SNS use and PWB from a hierarchical goal perspective, the research makes several contributions. First, the findings provide a more holistic and nuanced view beyond prior research focusing on relationships among abstract factors related to SNS user adoption (e.g., Braun, 2013; Ifinedo, 2016; Kim, 2011) in that the study provides knowledge of how par-

³ Distribution of Facebook users in the United States as of January 2016, by age group. Statista (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/187041/us-user-age-distribution-on-facebook/>)

⁴ Younger Users Spend More Daily Time on Social Networks. eMarketer (<http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Younger-Users-Spend-More-Daily-Time-on-Social-Networks/1011592>)

² Facebook, whose monthly active users have reached 1.1 billion, is a leading SNS in terms of reach and scope (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>).

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