



## Full length article

## Passive social network site use and subjective well-being: A moderated mediation model

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether self-esteem mediated the relationship between passive social network site use (SNS) and subjective well-being, and whether this mediating process was moderated by effortful control. 451 college students (mean age = 21.51 years, SD = 1.47) in Hubei province, China, completed anonymous questionnaires regarding passive SNS use, subjective well-being, self-esteem and effortful control. The results showed that the negative association between passive social network site use and subjective well-being was mediated by self-esteem. Moreover, the mediating effect of self-esteem was moderated by effortful control, with the mediating effect being stronger for individuals with low effortful control than for those with high effortful control. These findings can be beneficial to our understanding of how and when passive SNS use impacts college students' well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Social Network sites (SNSs) have become a large, growing phenomenon on the Internet over the past decade. These sites represent a very important online platform for individuals to interact with others, and to establish and maintain relationships (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Anne Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). A current concern is whether there are possible negative effects of SNS use on individuals' social adaptation and well-being. However, a rich body of research on the relationship between SNS use and well-being and has reported mixed results. Some research has indicated that use of SNSs is good for individuals' social connectivity (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; McEwan, 2013), allows users to engage in social activities as well as to build social capital in online settings (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), reduces users' loneliness (Deters & Mehl, 2013) and promotes individuals' well-being (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Other research has revealed that SNS use is associated with negative psychosocial variables such as loneliness or depression (Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy,

2015), and predicts declines in subjective well-being (Chen & Lee, 2013; Kross et al., 2013).

The inconsistency in the literature to date may be due to the fact that specific patterns of SNS use are not taken into account. Given the growing popularity of SNSs, it is especially important to examine the potential benefits and drawbacks of different patterns of SNS use. One important pattern of use is a passive pattern in which users just observing other people's statuses or photos on SNSs without any attempts to provide social connection with others (Tosun, 2012). Understanding this passive pattern of SNS use can help guide the management of negative experiences with SNSs such as Facebook in a psychologically and relationally healthy manner (Fox & Moreland, 2015). This study investigates the effect of passive SNS use on college students' subjective well-being, tests a moderated mediation model in which passive SNS use is indirectly related to subjective well-being through self-esteem, and tests whether this indirect association is moderated by effortful control.

## 1.1. Passive SNS use and well-being

Given that various patterns of SNS use are thought to be associated with different benefits or consequences, researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of examining how people use

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SNSs, in particular whether they do so actively or passively. The assumption is that different patterns of SNS use have different impacts on subjective well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015). Prior research indicated that SNS use can be dichotomized into passive and active forms of use (Alloway & Alloway, 2012; Deters & Mehl, 2013; Tosun, 2012). Passive use involves consuming information without any comments or any attempts to provide social connection with others (e.g., scrolling through news feeds, viewing posts); active use refers to activities that facilitate direct exchanges or communication and interactions with others (e.g., posting status updates, commenting on posts, giving “likes” to friends’ status updates) (Verduyn et al., 2015). This distinction is important because passive SNS use may be detrimental to users’ social adaptation (Shaw, Timpano, Tran, & Joormann, 2015). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, only a few studies have focused on the role of passive (or active) SNS use in individuals’ well-being. For instance, Burke, Marlow, and Lento (2010) differentiated between the effects of passive Facebook activities and directed Facebook communication (such as wall posts, comments, and “likes”). They found that passive Facebook activities were associated with weaker ties with Facebook friends and increased loneliness, whereas directed communication led to the opposite. Shaw et al. (2015) found that passive Facebook use was positively associated with social anxiety symptoms. Verduyn et al. (2015) used an experimental manipulation, cueing people in the laboratory to use Facebook passively (rather than actively), and found that passive use led to declines in affective well-being.

Because prior research has focused primarily on the direct link between passive SNS use and well-being, little is known about the mediating mechanism and moderating factors in this relation. Answers to these questions are essential for a better understanding of how passive SNS use influences well-being and the potential protective factors in this process. The present study fills this gap by investigating the following two questions: first, whether passive SNS use reduces self-esteem, which in turn reduces users’ subjective well-being; second, whether the indirect association between passive SNS use and subjective well-being is moderated by important individual characteristics such as effortful control.

## 1.2. Self-esteem as a mediator

Self-esteem refers to one’s general value judgement of worthiness (Rosenberg, 1965). This judgement expresses the degree of approval or disapproval of oneself. High self-esteem represents a positive sense of one’s value (e.g., capability, significance) as a person (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, & Wold, 2012). Low self-esteem individuals often feel worthless, unwelcome, and regard themselves as the failure (Crocker & Park, 2004). It is a determinant of mental and physical health (Ford & Collins, 2010; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Numerous studies have suggested that self-esteem has a significant impact on important life outcomes, such as depression (Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Li, Delvecchio, Riso, Salcuni, & Mazzeschi, 2015; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Sowislo, Orth, & Meier, 2014), relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Shackelford, 2001), life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995), social support (Marshall, Parker, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2014), and positive and negative affect (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002). A meta-analysis of 77 longitudinal studies documented that the effect of self-esteem on depression was significantly stronger than the effect of depression on self-esteem, which suggested that low self-esteem is a risk factor for low well-being rather than the outcome (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). These studies provide strong evidence that self-esteem is predictive of a person’s well-being.

Sociometer theory suggests that changes in self-esteem help the

individual to gauge whether or not social relationships are functioning properly (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Self-esteem fluctuates in response to social feedback and social exclusion (Lamer, Reeves, & Weisbuch, 2015), and can be shaped by social relationships (Leary et al., 1995). Given the relevance of SNSs to a variety of social functions, the effect of SNS use on self-esteem has received increased attention in recent years (e.g., Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Gonzales (2014) used experience sampling methods to examine the frequency and quality of communication across multiple channels (e.g., Facebook, texting, face to face communication, cell phone, etc.) in relation to self-esteem, and found that text-based communication (e.g., Facebook) was more important for self-esteem than face-to-face or phone communication. Similarly, Tazghini and Siedlecki (2013) examined the relationship between Facebook use and self-esteem in a sample of college students, and showed that low self-esteem was associated with negative or passive Facebook activities such as spending more time viewing pages than commenting on pages. These results suggest that SNSs may play a special and important role in shaping users’ sense of self-worth.

In addition, SNSs provide abundant social comparison opportunities, and according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), continually exposing oneself to Facebook should elicit envy, lead people feel worse (Edson, Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015; Verduyn et al., 2015), and cause people to make poorer self-evaluations. Across two studies employing different methodological approaches, Vogel et al. (2014) examined the impact of chronic and temporary exposure to social comparison information via SNSs in terms of the impact on self-esteem. The results revealed that participants who used Facebook most often had poorer self-esteem, especially after viewing social media profiles with positive content. Passive SNS use may specifically undermine self-esteem because passive SNS users tend just to view pages and avoid communicating and interacting with others.

Thus, we hypothesized that passive SNS use may undermine self-esteem, which in turn would lead to lower subjective well-being. In other words, self-esteem might function as a mediator in the relationship between passive SNS use and subjective well-being.

## 1.3. Effortful control as a moderator

Although passive SNS use may undermine self-esteem and well-being, it is possible that not all people are equally influenced by its effects. Consequently, it is important to examine variables that may moderate the relationship between passive SNS use and negative outcomes. In this study, we investigated whether the direct and/or indirect pathways would vary as a function of individuals’ effortful control.

Viewed as an aspect of self-regulation, effortful control is defined as “the efficiency of executive attention, including the ability to inhibit a dominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors” (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Effortful control includes the abilities to willfully focus, shift attention, and exhibit inhibitory and activational control (Valiente et al., 2003). Higher levels of effortful control are related to better coping with stressful life events, better regulation of negative thoughts and emotions, and better psychosocial adjustment (Eisenberg, Hofer, & Vaughan, 2007; Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010). For example, adolescents high in effortful control may be able to disengage from internal bad feelings or emotions and environmental threats by focusing their attention on positive aspects of the environment (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1997). In contrast, lower levels of effortful control are associated with lacking

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