



How is negative affect associated with life satisfaction? The moderating role of online self-disclosure in China's context

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ABSTRACT

Although affect is widely accepted to be a critical factor in improving one's life satisfaction, little is known about how this association works. This study proposes a moderating role of online self-disclosure between affect and life satisfaction. We conducted a survey with 621 valid respondents at 10 Chinese universities and performed correlation and regression analyses to explore the hypotheses. The findings confirm that positive affect is positively associated with life satisfaction, while negative affect is negatively associated with life satisfaction. Meanwhile, negative affect is not a strong predictor of life satisfaction in China's context compared to that of more individualistic nations. For individuals with higher online self-disclosure, the moderating effect is much stronger and weakens the association between negative affect and life satisfaction. The conclusions in this study contribute to the understanding of the moderating mechanism between affect and life satisfaction that is caused by online self-disclosure. The results further imply that frequent online self-disclosure may have a blocking effect on the connection between negative affect and life satisfaction.

1. Introduction

The popularity of social media enables people to express their emotions, thoughts and opinions simultaneously with other people through various online channels (Jou & Wang, 2013; Walton & Rice, 2013). This sharing leads to the formation of online self-disclosure, a process where one reveals his or her personal information to a certain person or group of people online. Compared to traditional or offline self-disclosure, the most distinct characteristics of online self-disclosure are that it is anonymous, unidentifiable and convenient (Joinson, 2001). These features attract numerous youths to share their daily life and feelings in computer-mediated communication; thus, online self-disclosure is becoming an alternative form of self-disclosure for emerging adults (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2014; Zhong & Appelman, 2014).

Since self-disclosure is widely accepted to be a critical factor in life satisfaction enhancement, it has been extensively studied in the psychology research on depression, loneliness, trust, and self-esteem in particular (Kahn & Garrison, 2009; Leung, 2002; Ward, Doherty, & Moran, 2007). Given the large number of social media users and the potential impact of online self-disclosure on life satisfaction, it is

important to understand how the underlying mechanism of online self-disclosure influences these outcomes. For example, Zhu (2011) found that online self-disclosure has allowed people with depression to gain social support and sympathy from the members of their online group and could help individuals with depression improve their mental health and subjective well-being.

It is well known that positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction are components of subjective well-being, which reflect the cognitive and affective states in our daily life. Understanding how online self-disclosure influences these components can help individuals to regulate emotional states and quality of life more effectively. However, it is still unknown whether online self-disclosure has a moderating role in or impact on positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction. Affect and life satisfaction, as well as online self-disclosure and life satisfaction, are suggested to have a relationship that is directly linear. Previous studies have noted that online self-disclosure is positively associated with life satisfaction (Huang, 2016; Lee, Lee, & Kwon, 2011; Liu, Tov, Kosinski, Stillwell, & Qiu, 2015; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016). Few studies have examined the moderating effect of online self-disclosure on affect and life satisfaction. Therefore, considering online self-disclosure as a moderating mechanism may provide a new

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perspective in explaining how different emotional states influence perceptions and assessments of daily life. It is also beneficial for social media vendors, health professionals and policy makers to make full use of the latent association between them. Moreover, different cultures may have different methods of self-disclosure (Krasnova, Veltri, & Günther, 2012; Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010), and culture may influence the relationship between affect and life satisfaction. It is also important for us to examine the phenomenon of individual's online self-disclosure and nuanced influence of culture on life satisfaction judgments, especially in a typical collectivist nation like China.

1.1. Positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction

To understand affect and life satisfaction, subjective well-being is an unavoidable concept. Subjective well-being is individuals' cognitive and affective evaluation of their overall quality of life. Subjective well-being could be classified into two components in general, namely, the affective part and the cognitive part (Andrews & Withey, 1976). The affective part consists of positive affect and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Positive affect is an individual's tendency to experience a happy emotional state and is characterized by vitality, enthusiasm, and pleasure. Negative affect is an individual's tendency to experience an unhappy emotional state and is characterized by tension, depression, and unhappiness (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). The cognitive part of subjective well-being mainly concerns life satisfaction, which refers to individuals' overall perception and assessment of their satisfaction with their choices during either the majority of their life or during a particular period of their life. The cognitive part is an important indicator of the level of an individual's personal mental health and quality of life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction are three independent concepts (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996; Stones & Kozma, 1985), and although they can partially reflect the perceived levels of subjective well-being, their performance differs (Pavot & Diener, 1993).

Previous studies have investigated the relationship between affect and life satisfaction from the two perspectives of subjective well-being and affect-as-information. Regarding the subjective well-being perspective, studies have examined the structural relations among the three constructs. For example, Diener, Suh, and Oishi (1997) found that if one's subjective well-being is high, positive affect has more presentations, negative affect has fewer presentations, and life satisfaction is positive. Early studies have confirmed a positive correlation between positive affect and life satisfaction and a negative correlation between negative affect and life satisfaction (e.g., Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener, 2002; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Concerning the affect-as-information perspective, studies have explored why positive and negative affect have impacts on life satisfaction. The prevalent perception is that people rely heavily on their affect balance, which refers to the proportion of positive affects to negative affect that they experience. The affect balance serves as an important source of information for people to make judgments on how satisfied they are with their lives (Lucas, 2007; Schwarz & Clore, 2007). Based on these theoretical works, prior research has confirmed that life satisfaction is positively predicted by positive affect and negatively predicted by negative affect (Bakalim & Taşdelen-Karçay, 2015; Yilmaz & Arslan, 2013).

However, previous studies have investigated some factors that influence the magnitude of the relationship between affect and life satisfaction. One common notion is that culture may change the relationship between positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. For example, Suh et al. (1998) found that negative emotion seems to be more strongly correlated with life satisfaction in more individualistic nations. Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, and Ahadi (2002) also found that people's life satisfaction in individualistic cultures was more strongly predicted by affect balance than in collectivistic cultures. Kuppens, Realo, and Diener (2008) further compared this impact in individualistic and collectivistic nations and concluded that negative

affect exerts much more impact on life satisfaction. Previous studies have been conducted in North America (the United States and Canada), the Middle East (Iran and Israel), West Asia (Turkey) and South Asia (India). It is currently unknown whether there is a consistent performance in East Asia, where collectivism is prevalent. To fill this gap, this paper focuses on China exclusively, a typical collectivist nation in East Asia, to further analyze the relationship between affect and life satisfaction in this specific cultural context.

1.2. The impact of online self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is vital to one's mental health. Self-disclosure is beneficial to individuals regardless of whether the content of self-disclosure is positive or negative (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). For instance, raising one's level of self-disclosure could reduce one's loneliness (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; Leung, 2002). Disclosing one's distress to other people can increase trust and intimacy while reducing stress and improving life satisfaction (Ward et al., 2007). Similar negative effects have been found in people with negative feelings, such as depression and anxiety (Kahn & Garrison, 2009; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). Therefore, positive self-disclosure can significantly reduce loneliness, depression, anxiety and other negative emotions.

Self-disclosure has been proved to be a significant moderating variable that can actively promote subjective well-being by moderating various emotional states. Most of these studies focused on face-to-face self-disclosure, for example, Adams and Cantin (2013) noted that self-disclosure buffers the relationship between peer victimization and depressive symptoms among overweight teenagers. In another study, Shen (2015) found that self-disclosure strengthens the relationship among loneliness, life dissatisfaction and online social support seeking. However, as an expansion of face-to-face self-disclosure in a computer-mediated communication environment, few empirical studies have examined whether online self-disclosure has a moderating role between positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. The extant studies find that only self-efficacy and self-control can significantly and negatively moderate negative affect and life satisfaction (Lightsey, Maxwell, Nash, Rarey, & McKinney, 2011). Therefore, it is unknown whether online self-disclosure has the same moderating role as face-to-face self-disclosure.

The linkage between online self-disclosure and positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction is emphasized. Online self-disclosure maintains close relationships with various negative emotions. For example, Mccord, Rodebaugh, and Levinson (2014) found that people with high social anxiety reported more online self-disclosure on Facebook. Al-Saggaf and Nielsen (2014) found that when people felt more loneliness, they disclosed more personal, relationship, and address information on Facebook. Online self-disclosure could help people with depression improve their level of mental health (Zhu, 2011), increase Facebook users' self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), and ease a person's sense of tension and social anxiety (Green, Wilhelmsen, Wilmots, Dodd, & Quinn, 2016). In addition, many studies reveal that a higher level of online self-disclosure results in a higher level of perceived subjective well-being (Ko & Kuo, 2009; Lee et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2015).

As mentioned above, online self-disclosure may interact with positive and negative affect and eventually exert an influence on one's life satisfaction. When positive affect is perceived, individuals with high levels of online self-disclosure are more likely to improve their positive affect, which may strengthen the impact that is exerted by positive affect on life satisfaction. When negative affect is perceived, individuals with high levels of online self-disclosure are more likely to reduce their negative affect, which may weaken the impact that is exerted by negative affect on life satisfaction.

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