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Self-presentation mediates the relationship between Self-criticism and emotional response to Instagram feedback☆

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ABSTRACT

Instagram, a social networking site (SNS) with an emphasis on photo-sharing, is popular among young adults. Past research revealed positive and negative consequences from SNS use. We investigated how individuals emotionally respond to imagined positive and negative Instagram feedback depending on personality and self-presentation on Instagram, using a sample of Instagram users 18–30. The Depressive Experiences Questionnaire measured personality; the Self-Presentation on Facebook Questionnaire (adapted for Instagram) measured self-presentation on Instagram; positive and negative Instagram feedback scenarios were created to simulate situations experienced on Instagram; positive and negative affect clusters measured emotional reaction to the Instagram scenarios. False self-presentation mediated the relationship between Self-criticism and affective response to negative Instagram scenarios, highlighting the negative impact of intent to deceive on social media. Additionally, individuals scoring high in the maladaptive personality measures, Dependency and Self-criticism, responded with negative affect to the negative Instagram scenarios. Participants scoring high in Dependency and Efficacy (adaptive personality) responded with positive affect to the positive Instagram scenarios. We discussed the implications of the findings within the context of the two polarities model of personality and past research.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) greatly changed the way we communicate, relate, and express ourselves. The most well-known SNS, Facebook, boasts over 1.09 billion daily active users (Facebook Newsroom, 2016). Several individuals, inspired by the success of Facebook, developed SNSs to target specific functions of use (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat). Social networking sites encourage users to present the most positive aspects of one's life (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011) with the motivation of gaining virtual approval from friends via likes and comments. Past research reveals several psychological benefits of SNS use (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). However, SNS use presents certain barriers to psychological wellbeing. Past research indicates an association between Facebook usage and low self-esteem (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014), negative affect (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014; Verduyn et al., 2015), decreased life satisfaction (Satici & Uysal, 2015), depressive symptoms (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014; Feinstein et al., 2013), diminished subjective wellbeing (Kross et al., 2013), and narcissism (Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Carpenter, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010).

Instagram is a mobile photo sharing application which greatly increased in popularity since its founding in 2010, with over 500 million active monthly users (Instagram Press News, 2016). Unlike Facebook, Instagram primarily focuses on photo sharing, image enhancement, and nonreciprocal relationships. A recent survey indicates that Instagram is the second most popular social media platform, with 59% of online adults ages 18–29 using Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2016). Instagram's rapid growth led to increased interest in investigating the psychological correlates of Instagram use. Previous research examined the relationship between narcissism and aspects of Instagram use (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Moon, Lee, Lee, Choi, & Sung, 2016; Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016). Most research investigated aspects of frequency of Instagram use (selfie-posting frequency, time spent, passive use), rather than exploring the experience, which may provide greater meaning to the literature. Ultimately, the research completed on Instagram has not caught up with the social media platform's rapid growth. Instagram's recent growth as well as its popularity among young adults demonstrates the importance of researching this SNS. We examined how an individual's personality influences how they present themselves on Instagram and affects their emotional response to feedback on Instagram.

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1.1. Personality and SNS use: the two polarities model

Previous research identifies that SNS use fulfills two broad needs: the need to belong and the need for self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). The present research assesses personality using the two polarities model of personality. The two polarities model of personality suggests normal personality development requires the reciprocal interaction between the need to form and maintain satisfying relationships (interpersonal relatedness) and the need to have an independent sense of self (self-definition) (Luyten & Blatt, 2013). Disruptions in personality development earlier in life result in exaggerations in relatedness or self-definition at the expense of the other (Blatt, 2008), which is associated with psychopathology (Luyten & Blatt, 2011). Self-critical individuals prioritize their need for self-definition over maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. Dependent individuals prioritize their need for relatedness over forming a healthy self-concept (Luyten & Blatt, 2013).

Individuals motivated by interpersonal relatedness are more vulnerable to interpersonal feedback (e.g. being liked, rejected) (Besser & Priel, 2011) and low self-esteem (Leary, Terdal, Tambor, & Downs, 1995), while self-critical individuals use SNSs to fulfill the need for self-presentation (Mongrain & Zuroff, 1995). However, the ways that adaptive and maladaptive development needs are met through SNS use is complex. For example, past research associates frequent Facebook usage with both greater relatedness satisfaction and relatedness dissatisfaction. Relatedness dissatisfaction motivates use, and greater use is associated with greater relatedness satisfaction (Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011). This implies users partially meet their need for relatedness through SNS use.

Conversely, Instagram allows users to express differing aspects of the self, as the formation of one's identity is influenced by reactions and feedback from others (Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015). Individuals with narcissistic personality styles may present the false self on SNSs to gain recognition from others, through likes and comments (Balick, 2014). Past research indicates Instagram is more consistent with an individual's personal identity rather than their relational identity, when compared to other SNSs. Self-promotion is a main feature exhibited on Instagram more than other SNSs (Marcus, 2015). These findings suggest Instagram users are more concerned with carefully selecting images to promote their self-concept rather than connecting with others.

1.2. The present study

We investigated how reactions to feedback on Instagram are related to personality, specifically developmental needs to relate and define oneself.

Hypothesis 1. Individuals scoring high in Efficacy (adaptive self-definition) exhibit differences in emotional reactivity and false self-presentation compared to individuals scoring high in Self-criticism (maladaptive self-definition).

Hypothesis 2. Individuals scoring high in Dependency (maladaptive relatedness) report greater emotional reactions to positive and negative Instagram feedback.

Hypothesis 3. Individuals with high scores in Self-criticism (maladaptive self-definition) report greater emotional reactions to negative feedback.

Hypothesis 4. Individuals with high scores in Self-criticism (maladaptive self-definition) report greater presentation of the false self on Instagram.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

We recruited participants through Prolific Academic, a crowd-sourcing website that compensates individuals for participating in research. We restricted participation to participants reporting the United States, the United Kingdom, or Canada as their country of residence, the use of Instagram at least once per month, ages 18–30, and an approval rating of 95% or higher. Participants completed a survey consisting of questions regarding demographic information and Instagram usage, to ensure participants were active users. Applying a counterbalanced design, the survey randomly presented measures investigating emotional reactions to Instagram scenarios, self-presentation on Instagram, and personality to participants. Participants spent an average of 16 min to complete the survey. We excluded survey responses from analysis when completed under 7 min (9 participants), when participants were not active Instagram users (7 participants), or when questionable or invalid responding patterns emerged (15 participants). The percentage of those removed is consistent with findings of previous research (Meade & Craig, 2011). The Institutional Review Board from a small liberal arts college approved all procedures, and all participants consented to participate.

2.2. Participants

Overall, participants completed 238 surveys; however, we excluded 31 surveys from analysis. Participants with adequate submissions were compensated £1.17. The final sample consisted of 207 participants (52.7% female, 45.9% male, 1.4% transgender; mean age: 23.46, *SD*: 3.23; 4.3% African American, 12.6% Asian, 5.3% Hispanic, 0.5% Native American, 73.9% Caucasian, 3.4% other). Of these participants, 125 reported their current country of residence as the United States, 64 reported their current country of residence as the United Kingdom, and 18 reported their current country of residence as Canada. There were no significant gender differences in emotional reaction to positive, $t(202) = 0.60$, $p = 0.18$, and negative, $t(202) = 0.54$, $p = 0.71$, Instagram feedback.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Instagram self-report

Participants reported the minimum number of "likes" necessary to be satisfied with an Instagram post.

2.3.2. DEQ

The *Depressive Experiences Questionnaire* (DEQ; Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976) is a 66-item scale that measures the adaptive and maladaptive personality configurations, Self-criticism and Dependency. The scale is measured on a 7-point continuum from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores on Dependency or Self-criticism indicate maladaptive personality, while lower scores indicate adaptive personality. The scale was originally created to assess anaclitic and introjective depression; however, it has been used to measure personality (Luyten & Blatt, 2013). Empirical studies have supported the validity of three factors (Dependency, Self-criticism, Efficacy) in the measurement of personality in clinical and nonclinical samples (Blatt, 2008). Previous research demonstrated the high internal consistency of the scales (Zuroff, Quinlan, & Blatt, 1990). The Dependency scale consisted of statements like, "Without support from others who are close to me, I would be helpless." The present study used the Efficacy and Self-criticism scales to measure adaptive and maladaptive forms of self-definition. An example statement from the Self-criticism scale is, "I often find that I don't live up to my own standards or ideals." Items in the Efficacy scale reflect feelings of resiliency and competence (Blatt et al., 1976). An example statement from the Efficacy scale is, "I have many inner resources (abilities, strengths)."

2.3.3. SPFBQ

The *Self-Presentation on Facebook Questionnaire* (SPFBQ; Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2014) is a 17-item scale that measures varying degrees of presentation of the self on Facebook. The questionnaire assesses the degree in which an individual expresses facets of the real,

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