



Brief Report

It's all about Extraversion: Why Facebook friend count doesn't count towards well-being

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ABSTRACT

Social relationships are assumed to be among the most important sources of well-being. However, previous studies showing that objectively measured social network size contributes to well-being have not included personality traits. We investigated, in a sample of Facebook users ($N = 4701$), whether the effects of Extraversion on well-being are mediated by a larger network. Although network size was initially associated with heightened well-being, this association was rendered insignificant when Extraversion was controlled for. Extraversion had a direct positive effect on ratings of Life Satisfaction and Happiness, but none of this effect was mediated by Facebook network size. The previously reported on associations between social network size and well-being could, at least in some contexts, be an artifact of Extraversion.

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1. Introduction

Social relationships are considered one of the most important sources of well-being (Argyle, 1999; Myers & Diener, 1995). Psychological research on this topic has primarily focused on perceived social support, but social networks research has shown that also structural characteristics of the network, such as number of social relationships – the focus of the present research – contribute to well-being (Zhu, Woo, Porter, & Brzezinski, 2013). However, both lines of research have been hampered by methodological issues related to the use of self-reports. More specifically, estimates of network size have typically relied on name-generation techniques, which are highly susceptible to methodological artifacts (Marsden, 2005; Paik & Sanchagrin, 2013). However, online social network sites (SNSs) have recently allowed researchers to circumvent this problem by providing objective estimates of network size. Studies conducted on Facebook, the most popular SNS, with over 1.3 billion monthly users as of March 2014 (Key Facts – Facebook Newsroom), and site of the present research, have confirmed that social network size contributes to well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011). However, previous research employing objective estimates of network size has overlooked the potential role of personality, known to be an important determinant of both online

(Stopfer, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2013) and offline network size (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998), as well as of well-being (Weiss, Bates, & Luciano, 2008).

The Five-Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is currently the most popular framework of personality structure. According to this model, personality traits are biologically based and highly stable psychological tendencies with intrinsic paths of development. High Emotional Stability and high Extraversion are the two FFM traits that most consistently contribute to heightened well-being. Studies relying on self-reports of social network size have shown that Extraversion contributes to well-being by leading to desired social relationships (Argyle, 1999; Zhu et al., 2013). We initially sought to replicate this result using an objective measure of network size; i.e., number of Facebook friends. However, the results of the mediation analyses that we conducted did not conform to our expectations. Instead, they prompted to us the question of whether Facebook network size in any way contributes to greater well-being when Extraversion is controlled for.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Data on social networks was collected using a Facebook application programmed for purposes of the present research project. Potential participants were directed to our survey web-page, which straightforwardly explained the purpose of the research

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(e.g., the description of the research began with the sentence “This is a new type of scientific survey that uses a Facebook app to link friendship data to questions on social relations, values, views, and personality”) and allowed Facebook users to install our application after authentication. Before the application could be installed, the user had to explicitly agree (by accepting both the terms of use and the privacy and the data protection information) to share specified personal information (i.e., a full list of their Facebook friends and some background or control variables, such as gender and hometown) with the researchers. As an incentive to participate, everyone who completed the questionnaire, which took on average 16 min, was given feedback on his or her personal values profile. As additional incentives, consecutive raffles for an iPad and for a 500€ Amazon gift card were added at later stages of data collection. Participants received one raffle ticket for participating in the survey, and an additional ticket for each friend that participated. The application had three functions: (i) it retrieved data on the Facebook user's contact network and some background or control variables, (ii) it administered a questionnaire survey including measures of personality, attitudes, and personal values, and (iii) it allowed the user to share the application in his or her contact network, either by posting the link to the application along with comments on the user's own Facebook page (for a contact to see), or by sending a private invitation to selected Facebook friends.

Participants were primarily recruited via invitations sent to e-mail lists. Several invitations to the University of Helsinki (Finland) and Aalto University (Finland) student and staff email lists were sent between June 2012 and May 2014. The number of participants that responded to the Finnish language questionnaire was 4701 (66% women; mean age 32.6 ($SD = 11.4$); nationality Finnish; 43.9% full-time and 14.0% part-time employed, 26.6% students; the questionnaire was also available in Swedish, English, and German, but extremely few responded in these languages, and this data was in no way analyzed). Sample size was determined by the time interval in which the study was performed – we started as soon as soon as the application was operational and included all responses that had been gathered at the time the analyses for the present paper were run.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Personality

Personality was measured by having participants complete, in self-report format, the National Character Survey (NCS; Terracciano et al., 2005; for the approved Finnish translation, see Realo et al., 2009). This measure – designed to mimic the original 240 item NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) – consists of 30 bipolar items, of which each measures a facet of the FFM (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Cross-instrument correlations between the NCS personality factors and longer measures of the FFM personality factors tend to vary between .70 and .80 (Konstabel, Lönnqvist, Walkowitz, Konstabel, & Verkasalo, 2012). Participants were instructed to rate themselves on a five-point scale using the 30 NCS items and at the top of the questionnaire was printed ‘I am...’. For instance, the two poles of the Extraversion Warmth facet were ‘Friendly, warm, affectionate’ and ‘Cool, aloof, reserved’. Scores on the five factors were calculated as the means of the six relevant facets. The scales measuring Extraversion ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.65$, $\alpha = 0.72$), Emotional Stability ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.66$, $\alpha = 0.75$), Openness to Experience ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.56$, $\alpha = 0.56$), Agreeableness ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.57$, $\alpha = 0.69$), and Conscientiousness ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.63$, $\alpha = 0.76$) all had their mean scores near the mid-point of the scales, showed reasonable standard deviations, and the alpha internal consistency reliabilities indicated nothing unusual. The intercorrelations

between the personality traits, as well as all other variables that we report on, are provided in the [Supplementary online material](#).

2.2.2. Well-being

Well-being comprises both an emotional aspect of affect balance – referring to the level of positive and negative emotions – and a cognitive aspect of satisfaction with life, conceptualized as a sense of satisfaction with one's life (Diener, 1984). The more cognitive aspects of well-being were measured with the ten-point Life Satisfaction scale from the European Social Survey: ‘All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? 1 means you are “completely dissatisfied” and 10 means you are “completely satisfied”’. Where would you put your satisfaction with your life as a whole?’. The mean score on the Life Satisfaction scale was 7.69 ($SD = 1.43$).

The more emotional aspect of well-being was measured using the four-point Happiness scale from the World Values Survey: ‘Taking all things together, would you say you are: Very happy, Quite happy, Not very happy, or Not at all happy?’. The mean score on the Happiness scale was 3.08 ($SD = 0.59$). No other well-being or personality measures than those reported on in the present paper were administered.

2.2.3. Number of Facebook friends

Participants granted our Facebook application the right to retrieve a full list of their Facebook friends. The average number of Facebook friends was 251.93 ($SD = 173.60$).

3. Results

The mediation analyses shown in Fig. 1 revealed that Extraversion predicted both number of Facebook friends and our two measures of well-being. However, the effects of Extraversion on well-being were not mediated by number of Facebook friends. Bootstrap analyses computed using percentile bootstrap estimates from 100,000 resamples (Hayes & Scharkow, 2013) yielded, in the prediction of Life Satisfaction and Happiness with Extraversion, indirect effects of -0.00 ($CI = -0.02-0.02$; where CI is the 95%

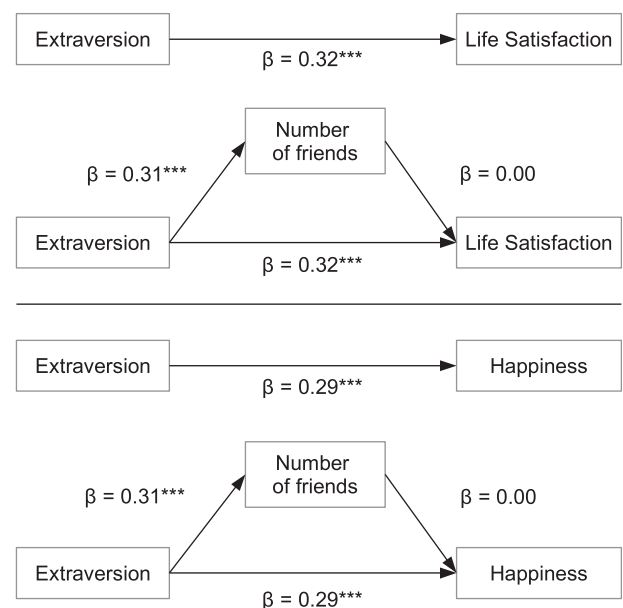


Fig. 1. The mediation models show the effects of Extraversion on Life Satisfaction (top panel) and on Happiness (bottom panel), with and without number of friends included in the model. Age and sex were controlled for in all models. Asterisks indicate significant paths ($***p < .001$).

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