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## The pursuit of virtual happiness: Exploring the social media experience across generations

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### ABSTRACT

Social media environments can transform and reinforce life experiences, influencing self-concept and providing happiness. The goal of this research is to examine social media networking as an experiential phenomenon, wherein consumers pursue virtual happiness by satisfying the self-determination theory (SDT) needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Beginning with the memory connection to self-concept, the study proposes an experiential outcome circle for social media to virtual happiness. A circle depicts the idea that self-concept motivates social media behavior, which influences the self-concept. Happiness, or affect balance, is a potential outcome of this connection. The study analyzes  $n = 504$  social media networking participants using generational cohorts with fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). This study suggests the metaphors for each generation based on the following SDT recipes: (1) “we” for generation Y with relatedness and competence, (2) “me” for generation X, with autonomy and competence, and (3) “be” for baby boomers with competence.

### 1. Introduction

Happiness can be an endless and often relentless goal for individuals in society. As consumers, individuals often traverse the marketplace, acquiring goods and services, on the path to happiness. Guevarra and Howell (2015) indicate that experiences or experiential products, such as travel, video games, or electronic devices, offer greater happiness than material ones, such as jewelry or clothing. Because the consumption of experiences versus material goods can lead to greater self-definition, these experiences may also result in higher levels of happiness (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). In effect, social media platforms are also experiential products. Social media can transform and continually reinforce life experiences, both positively and negatively (Scheinbaum, 2017). For example, many social media platforms allow members to share their consumption experiences, enabling self-reflection, growth, and learning, potentially affecting their happiness (Bosangit & Demangeot, 2016). By facilitating social media experiences that positively affect the happiness and subjective well-being of target markets, marketers can more effectively engage with consumers.

When an experience leads to a memory, it is more likely to shape an individual's self-concept (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Such experiences, whether they are ordinary (common and frequent) or extraordinary

(beyond everyday life), determine and affect a consumer's happiness (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Social media networking involves the active consumption of an experience because it allows individuals to share moments that later become a set of memories, carefully time-lined and linked to virtual others throughout cyberspace. The enjoyment and happiness resulting from such shared experiences are influenced by motivations to belong and confidence in social information (Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006).

As people age and traverse through different life stages, not only does their definition of happiness itself shift (Mogilner, Kamvar, & Aaker, 2011), but also their view of their lifespan, also known as the future perspective (Strough et al., 2016). Differences in the meaning of happiness stem from several types of arousal; whereas happiness for younger people can result from high states of arousal such as excitement, older people can achieve happiness from low states of arousal such as peacefulness. In a meta-analytic study of subjective well-being, Pinquart (2001) finds that as age increases, overall positive affect decreases, and high and low arousal and emotional states decline. Social media experiences enable both empowerment activities as well as social interactions. Yuksel, Milne, and Miller (2016) empirically validate differences in younger versus older consumers. They find that college-aged consumers gain more value from socialization than older

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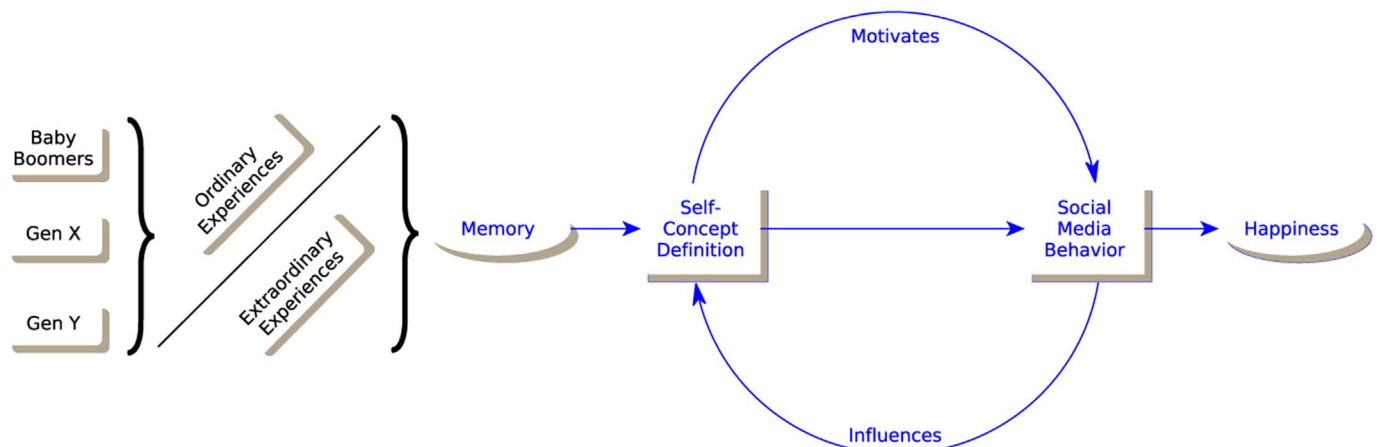


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

consumers. Yuksel and colleagues surmise that generation effects could be the reason for this difference, and the recent research also indicates that social media provides different cognitive responses (in terms of satisfaction) with a basis in various motivational antecedents per generation (Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016).

The goal of the present research is to examine social media networking as an experiential phenomenon wherein consumers pursue virtual happiness in their everyday exchanges. The present study views happiness as a potential affective outcome of social media experiences and builds on the research regarding age and generational differences. First, the study offers a conceptual framework that combines the definition of self-concept, self-determination theory (SDT), and happiness (see Fig. 1). Then, through a quasi-convenience sample of 504 subjects, the study explores various motivation recipes according to SDT for each generation, using fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). Finally, the study presents conclusions, implications, and limitations to offer a broader understanding of social media networking, generational motivations, and SDT.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Self-concept definition and generations

Because teenagers are still forming their self-identity, their activity on social media networks provides insights into their identity construction and self-enhancement (Doster, 2013). In their qualitative study of generation Y consumers, Noble, Haytko, and Phillips (2009) identify the socialization issues of freedom and self-identity (finding oneself) as their key purchasing motivations. Individuals can change their beliefs and behaviors through implicit experience-taking when they spontaneously assume the mindset of a character in a fictional novel (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). To do this, they must temporarily set aside their self-concept and allow themselves to adopt the internal traits of the narrative character. Social media is an experiential phenomenon wherein consumers identify with the characteristics of others in virtual space.

Several theories, including self-verification theory, self-determination theory, and uniqueness theory, discuss identity construction as having a set of six key motives: self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, efficacy, and meaning. Identity structure can be delineated into cognitive and affective dimensions, with happiness serving as the strongest predictor of self-esteem, efficacy, and belonging (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollledge, & Scabini, 2006). Another interesting aspect of self-concept is the self-synchronization process that occurs as part of the construction of a socially adaptive identity, which Kawakami et al. (2012) find can enhance survival likelihood. This socially adaptive identity will change over time and through different experiences that

allow individuals to be shaped by their physical and virtual experiences. The idea of a malleable self-concept has relevance when individuals feel that they are adapting to self-descriptive groups that have high psychological utility (Sim, Goyle, McKedy, Eidelman, & Correll, 2014). As such, even the process of aging itself is considered a socially constructed subjective phenomenon that results from positioning in society and an acceptance of the identity labels associated with “elderly” or “old age” (Barnhart & Peñaloza, 2013).

In a study on the social media networking practices of college-aged users, Krasnova, Widjaja, Buxmann, Wenninger, and Benbasat (2015) indicate that the consumption of social information can lead to increases in envy and self-enhancement strategies and ultimately lower cognitive and affective well-being. According to a study on the happiest 10% of college students, Diener and Seligman (2004) conclude that while students need positive social relationships for their well-being, these relationships alone are not sufficient. Because linkages exist between studies on aging and generational cohorts, these are two separate but intertwined concepts. The formation of self-concept can be strongly tied to social identity, especially during younger years because it is malleable and needs further development. At the same time, generational cohorts share social, cultural, and technological experiences, that can lead to similar identity structures.

### 2.2. Self-determination theory, social media networking behavior, and happiness

Self-determination theory posits that three basic psychological needs drive behavior and lead to growth, development, and well-being. They are relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011). Relatedness provides a feeling of belongingness, namely the need to connect with and develop close and affectionate relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need for autonomy involves a sense of freedom and the ability to control one's own life in a way that enhances one's sense of identity (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Lastly, the need for competence refers to feelings of being able to control one's environment and the results of one's actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, people must satisfy all three of these needs to experience the height of well-being, or happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Indeed, the research shows that the satisfaction of these psychological needs may be a predictor of well-being, relationship quality, and happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Sapmaz, Doğan, Sapmaz, Temizel, & Tel, 2012). To some degree, each of these needs motivates behaviors in daily experiences, including virtual lives. In terms of social media behavior, the research primarily evaluates SDT as a predictor of satisfaction, a cognitive outcome (Krishen et al., 2016). Ong, Chang, and Lee (2015) were among the first to explore factors that influence website-related emotions in their study on Facebook users. They stress

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