Glancing up or down: Mood management and selective social comparisons on social networking sites

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) provide opportunities for mood management through selective exposure. This study tested the prediction that negative mood fosters self-enhancing social comparisons to SNS profiles. Participants were induced into positive or negative moods and then browsed manipulated profiles on an experimental SNS. Profiles varied in a 2 × 2 within-subjects design along two dimensions, ratings of career success and attractiveness, allowing for upward comparisons (high ratings) and downward comparisons (low ratings). Selective exposure was measured in seconds spent viewing profiles. Negative mood led to less exposure to upward comparisons and more to downward comparisons than positive mood. The comparison dimension did not influence selective exposure. Thus, in a negative mood, SNS users prefer self-enhancing social comparisons to manage their mood.

1. Introduction

The use of social networking sites (SNS) has skyrocketed in recent years, with Americans now devoting a monthly average of nearly 7 h to Facebook alone, the most of any web brand (Nielsen Wire, 2012). Over 40% of online adults use an SNS daily, outpaced only by the daily use of email (61%) and search engines (59%) (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). A growing body of research has explored the appeal of SNSs, how they are used, and what their effects are (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

The present investigation aims to extend research on motivations for using SNSs by drawing on selective exposure methodology and mood management theory (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006; Zillmann, 1988). Like other popular forms of media, individuals may select SNS content with the motivation to regulate mood. One specific mechanism for SNS mood management could be self-enhancing social comparisons (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Wills, 1981). This study tests the proposition that when individuals are in an aversive mood, SNS browsing has a self-enhancement bias toward downward comparisons and away from upward comparisons. After reviewing relevant literature on SNS use, mood management, and social comparison, we present the results of an experiment in which participant browsing behavior on an

SNS-type website was unobtrusively recorded, following a mood induction.

1.1. Research on social networking sites

SNSs are platforms where individuals can create a personal profile and connect with other users. The format emerged in the early 2000s and quickly became a critical part of the web environment and a topic of interest for researchers in communication and related fields (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNS research in the social sciences has focused on four general topics: motivations for use, the nature of self-presentation, consequences for interpersonal behavior, and privacy and disclosure (Wilson et al., 2012).

Across studies of motivation, researchers examined how the maintenance and development of social capital fosters SNS use (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), as does the need to reduce loneliness and boredom (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008). However, studies examining needs possibly facilitated by social comparison, such as self-esteem or affect maintenance, are limited (Zywica & Danowski, 2008), although surveys show positive relationships between SNS use and self-esteem (Kim & Lee, 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Experiments found that viewing one's own profile boosts self-esteem, but did not examine viewing others' profiles (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Likewise, there is little research to date regarding social comparison in the SNS setting (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011) despite the potential for social comparison and mood management phenomena during SNS use.

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1.2. Mood management online

One important motive for the selection of media is mood management (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006; Zillmann, 1988). Consumption of media, especially television, music, and film, is one of several prevalent behaviors used to regulate moods (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994). Mood management theory stipulates that media exposure has the potential to repair or maintain affective states and that media messages are often chosen for this purpose. Yet this theory has seldom been tested with newer media like the Internet.

For web browsing, mood has been found to influence users' selective exposure to positively versus negatively valenced websites and to entertainment versus information websites (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2006), as well as users' speed of surfing (Mastro, Eastin, & Tamborini, 2002). Another study found that selective exposure to valenced online news was based on mood adjustment needs (Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2006). One study demonstrated that mood management affects choice of video game difficulty settings (Reinecke et al., 2012). Clearly, with the development of new forms of web content, including social media, new opportunities have arisen for mood management. The rapid adoption and fervent use of social networking sites suggest that these services meet important and powerful psychological drives in their users, possibly including the hedonic motivation to enhance and maintain positive moods and repair negative moods (cf. Mauri, Cipresso, Balgera, Villamira, & Riva, 2011).

SNSs offer several means by which users might manage mood. For example, viewing one's own profile can boost positive affect (Toma, 2010) and self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). In addition to a positive portrayal of the self, SNSs can be relaxing entertainment (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011) or can provide affect-enhancing feedback and social support (Kim & Lee, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006). However, much of the time on an SNS is focused not on the self, but spent viewing others' activities (Metzger, Wilson, Pure, & Zhao, 2012), suggesting that social comparison might be a key mechanism by which SNS use could enhance mood. Accordingly, initial evidence shows that downward social comparison on an SNS can increase positive affect (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). However, selective exposure to SNS social comparison targets for mood management purposes has not yet been examined.

1.3. Social comparison

Individuals compare themselves to others in their environment (including mediated environments) for purposes of self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Wood, 1989). One common form of comparison is downward comparison for purposes of self-enhancement (Wills, 1981). By selectively comparing one's self to others who are worse off, people are able to restore threatened self-esteem (Wills, 1981) and to restore positive affect (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). Self-enhancing comparisons may also take the form of upward comparisons, in which the individual identifies with or aspires to be like those who are better off (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Prior research has found that social comparison to others depicted in online news media is selective (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Knobloch-Westerwick & Westerwick, 2011). In a study of selective exposure to social comparison targets in online news, young adults were more likely to select stories about same-age individuals (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006). Among young and middle-aged adults, both sexes read more about same-sex individuals. Furthermore, self-esteem and sex interacted to predict comparison direction, with high self-esteem women preferring downward comparisons via negative depictions and high self-esteem men preferring upward comparisons via positive depictions (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006).

Another study (Knobloch-Westerwick & Westerwick, 2011) on social comparisons to online news depictions found that majority group members avoided reading positive in-group depictions while minority members preferred them. Minorities, who experienced greater identity salience, sought affiliation with their in-group as a means of self-enhancement, whereas majority group members sought self-enhancement and distinctiveness by avoiding positive depictions of in-group members (Knobloch-Westerwick & Westerwick, 2011). These studies demonstrate not only the selectivity that is at work in social comparison to mediated others, but also the influence that the need for self-enhancement places on selective exposure.

Furthermore, downward comparisons with mediated portrayals can facilitate mood management (Mares & Cantor, 1992) or bolster self-esteem (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). Mares and Cantor (1992) tested mood management and social comparison as competing hypotheses for older viewers' preferred depictions of others in media, yet found that downward social comparison was a mechanism for improving mood. Likewise, a study of selective exposure to music by romantically satisfied or dissatisfied young adults indicated that romantically dissatisfied participants avoided upward comparisons (love-celebrating songs), preferring laments by a singer of the same sex (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003).

The emergence of social media, featuring content created by and about other people in one's social network, offers rich opportunities for social comparison. Social comparison, even via media, is far more likely when targets are similar to the self, whether by age, sex, or other dimensions of identity (Festinger, 1954; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006, 2010; Suls, Gaes, & Gastorf, 1979; Zanna, Goethals, & Hills, 1975). As existing knowledge of friends' qualities and characteristics could facilitate the ease of making the desirable comparisons, social media are well situated for social comparison phenomena (Knobloch-Westerwick & Westerwick, 2011).

Yet, the implications of self-enhancing social comparison for mood management and the nature of mediated social comparisons outside of news contexts both have yet to be pursued by researchers, despite their promise. In one recent experiment using mock SNS profiles, participants who viewed profiles of less attractive or less successful people reported higher self-evaluations on those same dimensions, along with higher positive affect after viewing less attractive profiles (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). However, self-selected exposure to SNS profiles for purposes of social comparison was not tested.

Researchers have suggested that self-presentation practices contribute to idealized impressions of others and misperceptions of their well-being, especially online, threatening the individual's comparative well-being (Chou & Edge, 2012; Jordan et al., 2011). However, other evidence cautions that SNS self-presentations are more realistic than idealized (Back et al., 2010), and subject to constraints (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). Furthermore, selectivity in comparisons should allow for self-enhancing social comparisons even if many self-portrayals by others are unrealistically positive. Indeed, in addition to a tendency to select comparison targets that are similar to the comparer, targets may be chosen based on particular attributes that allow for self-enhancement (Wood, 1989). For example, when given a range of comparison attributes, men and women tended to compare on dimensions that fit their gender role schemata (Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2007). And, in a forced-exposure setting, although downward social comparisons regarding both career success and attractiveness had positive effects of self-perceptions, only attractiveness had a positive effect on mood (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011).