



Effects of users' envy and shame on social comparison that occurs on social network services



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ABSTRACT

In the context of the social network service environment, we explore how discrete emotions—envy and shame, in particular—may mediate the effects of social comparison on behavior intention and psychological responses. Based on the survey responses of 446 university students, the results suggest that social comparison to media figures correlates with a range of emotional responses as well as with behavioral intention and psychological responses. Envy maintained a significantly greater association with switch intention as a behavioral intention compared to shame. Conversely, shame was significantly related to burnout as a psychological response. Further, mediational analyses were consistent with the argument that envy and shame mediate the social comparison–outcome variables relationship. This research helps to illuminate the driving mechanism for the emotional effect that social comparison on social network service could elicit from a user. This predicts the nature of the behavioral and psychological outcome associated with the comparison and has implications for an enhanced understanding of the way in which the unique social network service communication environment may stimulate this process.

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1. Introduction

A social network service (SNS) is known as a good way for getting in touch with other people. Through SNS services, people receive news from their friends, feel that they remain connected all times, and share their interests and activities. For instance, some SNS users even wanted to share their happy moments via a campaign called “100 happy days” that was run by *Instagram* (i.e., one of the online photo-sharing SNS services). However, is it true that people become happy by watching other people's happiness and delightful moments through SNS? We aim to determine whether people are able to satisfy their life in the light of others' lives, as observed using SNS services. Numerous studies indicated that one person's happiness and delightful moments do not necessarily positively affect the lives of others. Panger (2014) suggested that SNS is strongly affected by the *Easterlin Paradox* which suggests that an increase in income is not necessarily associated with happiness; in this paradox, the need to use social comparison to achieve satisfaction is assumed to decline or even disappear along with an increase in income (Panger, 2014, p. 2096). Likewise, the use of SNS to achieve social comparison, as commonly occurs

between SNS users, seems to reduce their satisfaction with life. SNS has the effect of making social comparison easier and increasing the desire to make comparisons with others. Based on cognitive emotion theory, which is a recent topic of active discussion, social comparison causes users to become stressed and can be stimulating, thereby lowering users' satisfaction. In the present study, we suggest that social comparisons between SNS users may negatively affect those involved, eventually leading to negative behavioral intention and psychological responses.

2. Theoretical arguments and hypotheses

2.1. Cognitive emotion theory

One model that may serve as the theoretical background for the present study is cognitive emotion theory. Cognitive emotion theorists believe that emotions do not occur without preliminary appraisals of stressful events, and that these appraisals, rather than the events themselves, determine the said emotions (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1986). Koeske and Koeske (1993) explain this phenomenon via a three-layered stress–strain–outcome model and define stressors as irritating, troublesome, or disruptive stresses perceived through appraisals.

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The first stage of the model is the appraisal of stress, and consists of 2 steps (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In other words, in any given situation, people first examine whether the said situation is related to their well-being through a primary appraisal. When their situation is indeed related to their well-being, people consider potential harms, threats, or benefits inherent to the situation at hand (Lazarus, 1991). They then evaluate their own coping abilities through a secondary appraisal.

The next stage of the model is the formation of emotions from appraisals. Emotions arise from appraisals, with favorable appraisals creating emotions that correspond to approaching the target in question and unfavorable appraisals creating emotions that correspond to avoidance of the same target (Reeve, 1997). In this process, individuals come to formulate various actions that evaluate favorability based on their emotions and imagination. According to the stress-strain-outcome model, formation of emotions is seen as a strain and a psychological reaction to stressful situations (de Croon, Sluiter, Blonk, Broersen, & Frings-Dresen, 2004).

The final stage of the model is the formation of actions, intentions, or behaviors. The process of appraisal and emotional expression are ultimately visualized as coping behaviors for stress. Coping refers to making individually cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts to appease external and internal factors (Lazarus, 1991). In the stress-strain-outcome model, psychological responses affect behavioral intentions serving as a mediator for perceived stressors (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). Ellsworth (1994), in particular, emphasized the importance of social context in making appraisals and proposed the concept of norm/self-concept compatibility. In this discussion, Ellsworth proposed that humans are social creatures that are mindful of fellow group members' responses. Applying this argument to the current study, it may be the case that social comparisons act as stresses in social contexts, and that SNS users express emotions by comparing their self-concepts to the social standards they share with other members of society. This comparison with social standards may arouse envy and shame, with these emotions manifesting in actions or intentions. In this section, we theorize the influence of social comparison and emotion on consequences through a lens of cognitive emotion theory. Therefore, we first focus on the direct influence of social comparison on switch intention and burnout. Then we theorize the mediating role of emotion (envy and shame) between social comparison and consequences. The conceptual model of this study is Fig. 1 below.

2.2. Social comparison

The need for social comparison occurs when people aspire to compare certain aspects of their lives with those of others (Festinger, 1954). Although such comparisons can be made in relation to a dimension of a person's self-concept; in general, social comparison occurs between people who are relatively similar in opinions and abilities (Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Meisel & Blumberg, 1990; Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975). People who desire to make an upward comparison tend to compare themselves with someone successful (Wheeler, 1966), whereas a downward comparison is commonly made by making a comparison with someone unsuccessful (Wills, 1981). The direction of comparison is often determined by a person's objectives, which could either be self-enhancement or self-improvement (Collins, 1996; Wood, 1989). The goal of self-enhancement is achieved by making downward comparisons that would serve to maintain self-esteem (Tesser, 1988), which is known to enhance emotional as well as subjective well-being (Wills, 1981). In contrast, the desire to achieve the goal of self-improvement would lead people to make an upward comparison in order to improve their abilities in a given domain (Goethals

& Darley, 1977; Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). In this respect individuals may obtain inspiration from a comparison with other excellent examples (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), although their self-esteem may be damaged when superior examples are used (Morse & Gergen, 1970). The SNS environment has been observed to change the ways in which social comparison is conducted and comparison targets are set. Researchers, in particular, noted that SNS has resulted in a significant increase in upward comparisons (Midgley, 2013), a phenomenon that might be due to the characteristics of SNS communications. More specifically, some of the SNS characteristics that may stimulate social comparison are as follows.

First, those who use SNS to present themselves may select practice retrieval of positive self-presentation (Walther, 2007), which means that they may minimize their negative traits, while highlighting their achievements (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Characteristics of this nature are defined as being narcissistic. Narcissists aim to present exhibitionism and attention-seeking behaviors (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). In addition, they exhibit strategies for dominance and competitiveness in social situations (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The abovementioned narcissistic characteristics are often realized on SNSs, because these services provide platforms to manage personal impressions (Chou & Edge, 2012). In other words, in contrast to face-to-face communication, computer-mediated communication allows for the careful management of personal impressions (Chou & Edge, 2012). For example, the Facebook user interface contains functions that enable users to "tag" others, post comments, post pictures, and create status updates (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008); these features might be used as a tool for optimization of self-presentation, thereby allowing users to over-emphasize their achievements (Mehdizadeh, 2010). As a result, a person's SNS ego might create a better impression than in reality (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Second, on the other hand, users who receive positive presentations from senders have been found to apply some heuristics (Chou & Edge, 2012). The exponential growth of online SNSs has required people to become cognitive misers for rapid decision making (Lea & Spears, 1995; Spears & Lea, 1994; Wallace, 1999). This trend was more pronounced when users were dealing with strangers (Chou & Edge, 2012). Users make judgments based on easily recallable content when using available heuristics (MacLeod & Campbell, 1992; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973); thus, positive self-presentations made by others tend to be easily accepted. Further, the receivers of these messages are often biased by the nature of the correspondence and recognize differences with others based on limited behaviors and the use of language rather than on a situational awareness. As a result, receivers may not retrieve balanced information because of the available heuristics as well as the correspondence bias. This leads to the conclusion that the other party using the SNS is happier than themselves (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Third, an issue that must be taken into account is that SNS usage could be classified as either "active use" or "passive use." Users practicing "active use" are those who proceed to create content, whereas those engaging in "passive use"—which is often referred to as "social searching" and "social browsing" (Wise, Alhabash, & Park, 2010)—would experience more negative outcomes in social comparisons owing to their non-interactive behavior. Additional non-friendly social comparisons were facilitated in SNS with referential groups including the use of Facebook (Panger, 2014).

2.3. Social comparison and switch intention

With reference to IT services, switch intention is defined as a phenomenon of cyber migration, in which users abandon websites

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