



How does online social networking enhance life satisfaction? The relationships among online supportive interaction, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine whether supportive interactions on social networking sites mediate the influence of SNS use and the number of SNS friends on perceived social support, affect, sense of community, and life satisfaction. Employing momentary sampling, the current study also looked at the relationship between supportive interaction and immediate affect after the interaction over a period of 5 days. An analysis of 339 adult participants revealed a positive relationship between supportive interaction and positive affect after the interaction. A path model revealed positive associations among the number of SNS friends, supportive interactions, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction. Implications for the research of online social networking and social support are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social networking today is one of the most popular activities on the Internet. A recent report found that visiting social networking sites (SNSs) is the most frequent online activity of Internet users (comScore, 2011). Over 90% of adult users in the US have visited social media (Simmons, 2011). On average, social networking accounts for one of every 6 minutes that people spend online (comScore, 2011).

Considerable scholarly attention has focused on the psychological outcomes of online social networking, but the results have been inconsistent. Although researchers have studied various psychological outcomes (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2011; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), major indicators of online social networking (i.e., number of SNS friend, the amount of social networking) often failed to predict positive outcomes (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2011; Klingensmith, 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vitak, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2011). Inconsistent findings suggest two possibilities: First, prior online social networking studies have focused on varying predictors of psychological outcomes, some of which may be more valid than others. Second, there

may be a third variable that either mediates or moderates the relationships between the predictors and the outcomes.

The current study explores one possible mechanism through which peoples' online social networking leads to psychological outcomes. Specifically, this study proposes that the amount of supportive interaction mediates the relationship between general SNS use and users' psychological states. The traditional social network literature also highlights the importance of the quality of interaction among members in a network (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000) and the perception of available social support from other members (Young, 2006). Pursuing this argument, the current study proposes several mediating variables that include supportive interaction, affect, and perceived social support.

The present study focuses on two psychological outcomes, sense of community and life satisfaction, as they appear frequently in online communication and social network literature (Kim & Lee, 2011; Klingensmith, 2010; Köbler, Riedl, Vetter, Leimeister, & Krcmar, 2010; Young, 2006). Using a momentary sampling technique, which allows an examination of affect immediately after a behavior, this study first examines the direct relationship between the amount of supportive interaction and the positive affect following that interaction for five days. Secondly, the study uses a path model to explore the possible mechanism through which online social networking can lead to a greater sense of community and life satisfaction. By doing both, we expect to contribute to a better understanding of the positive outcomes of online social networking and clarify the issues related to mixed findings in the existing SNS literature.

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2. Theoretical background

2.1. Online social networking

Social network sites (SNSs) are defined as web-based applications that allow their users to construct a profile that other users can see and also list connections with other users (Ellison et al., 2007). Although the goal of an online social network remains the same as an offline social network, i.e., connecting people and sharing resources in the network, online networking further benefits users with its unique features related to computer-mediated communication. With the growing use of SNSs, certain studies have found that there are positive psychological outcomes from engaging in social networking on various social networking sites (Burke et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2007; Kim & Lee, 2011; Steinfield et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Valkenburg et al., 2006). The number of SNS friends and the amount of SNS use are currently the two most studied indicators that represent the amount of online social networking.

The number of friends, the main source of social support (Boyd, 2006), is one of the widely studied constructs in the online social networking literature (Ellison et al., 2007; Kim & Lee, 2011). These studies, however, reported inconsistent results when they treated the number of SNS friends as a direct predictor of psychological outcomes, thus suggesting the possibility that either mediating or moderating variables do exist (Kalpidou et al., 2011; Kim & Lee, 2011). For example, Kim and Lee (2011) found an inverted U relationship between the number of SNS friends and perceived social support among college students, where the number of total SNS friends was positively associated with perceived social support until the number of friends reached a certain point.

Facebook intensity, developed to measure the amount of Facebook use (Ellison et al., 2007), has also been frequently measured in the SNS literature. It combines the number of Facebook friends, hours or frequency of using Facebook, and the emotional attachment to Facebook, as well as indicators of habit strength and compulsive use (LaRose, Wohn, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2011). Studies using this construct often suffered from its weak explanatory power when it was included in a regression model (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Facebook intensity showed either negative (Klingensmith, 2010) or non-significant (Vitak et al., 2011) relationships with other indicators of well-being.

On the other hand, clinical studies have reported negative consequences associated with using Facebook (e.g., O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Pantic et al., 2012). A terminology “Facebook Depression” was developed by O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) in their clinical report to highlight a phenomenon that excessive use of Facebook leads to depression among certain groups of young people. Although this report has been criticized due to its exaggerated notion without clear evidence showing a direct causality between Facebook use and depression (e.g., Magid, 2011), there is still an ongoing debate on whether online social networking leads to clinical disorders such as depression. For example, Pantic et al. (2012) found a positive relationship between frequency of Facebook use and indicators of depression among high school students. Another recent survey study found no evidence suggesting the relationship between SNS use and clinical depression (Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013). These studies, however, used shallow measures of SNS use such as frequency of SNS use or time spent on SNS without considering actual activities or communication exchanged on those sites, which might have caused empty debates based on inaccurate evidence.

To address the need for nuanced measures for SNS use, Burke et al. (2010) distinguished between person-directed communication and consumption of content on a social networking site. This

study found that person-directed communication lowered loneliness and enhanced bonding social capital, which is a perception of available emotional and/or tangible aids from one’s social ties (Ellison et al., 2007). The solitary consumption of content, however, reduced social capital and enhanced loneliness. This study provided strong evidence that the mere use of social networking sites might not be a good indicator of online social networking, because it includes the solitary consumption of content which is not any different from general Internet use.

In sum, the type of online interaction should be examined to better understand online social networking that produces positive psychological outcomes. To further address this issue, the current study focuses on the amount of supportive interaction; namely, the amount of directed supportive communication a user engages in with another user. Admittedly, the amount of supportive interaction is likely associated with the level of general SNS use and the number of SNS friends, as people who have many SNS friends and use SNS frequently will have a greater probability of being involved in supportive interaction with other users. This study, therefore, begins with proposing that the number of SNS friends and the frequency of online social networking are positively associated with the amount of supportive interaction on social networking sites.

H1. The number of SNS friends is positively associated with the amount of supportive interaction on the social networking site.

H2. The frequency of online social networking is positively associated with the amount of supportive interaction on the social networking site.

2.2. Supportive interaction and social support on social networking sites

Social support, defined as the resources or aids exchanged between individuals through interpersonal ties (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983), is one of the key benefits that SNS users perceive from online social networking (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). This concept is considered as one of the most widely used concepts across various domains in social science, and has expanded its scope into the online context to explain the positive outcomes of online social networking.

Studies on online social networking have examined the exchange of social support through online social networking and its outcomes. Acquiring social support from others in a social network is found to be one of the most important reasons for online social networking (Park et al., 2009). In a recent report, SNS users perceived a greater level of emotional support and companionship than did general Internet users (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011), at a level that was almost equivalent to the amount that married or cohabitating Americans normally perceive from their live-in partners.

Although social networking sites may provide greater opportunities for exchanging social support, not all the elements of these sites are associated with social support. SNS users can use direct communication services, such as chatting and direct messaging, but they can also engage in third-party activities, such as updating profiles, viewing photographs of celebrities, searching for events at commercial companies, and playing games. Measuring general SNS use and linking the use with perceived social support is likely to produce a weak relationship because of the redundant indicators of online social networking. A recent study corroborates this argument, as it failed to reveal any significant relationship between Facebook intensity and social support (Vitak et al., 2011).

The current study examines the amount of supportive interaction that individuals engage in with others through direct user-

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