



# Passive social network site use and subjective well-being among Chinese university students: A moderated mediation model of envy and gender



Qian Ding<sup>a,b,1</sup>, Yong-Xin Zhang<sup>a,c,1</sup>, Hua Wei<sup>d</sup>, Feng Huang<sup>e</sup>, Zong-Kui Zhou<sup>a,b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Key Laboratory of Adolescent Cyberpsychology and Behavior (CCNU), Ministry of Education, Wuhan 430079, China

<sup>b</sup> School of Psychology, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China

<sup>c</sup> College of Education Science, Xinyang Normal University, Xinyang 464000, China

<sup>d</sup> School of Economics and Management, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China

<sup>e</sup> Center of Mental Health Education and Counseling, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei 230009, China

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 13 October 2016

Received in revised form 9 March 2017

Accepted 11 March 2017

Available online xxxx

### Keywords:

Passive social network site use

Envy

Subjective well-being

Gender differences

## ABSTRACT

Research has revealed that passive social network site (SNS) use might undermine subjective well-being. However, less is known about the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying this relationship. The current study tested the mediation effect of envy in the association between passive SNS use and low subjective well-being, and whether this mediating process was moderated by gender. A sample of 707 Chinese university students (mean age = 19.06 years,  $SD = 1.12$ ) completed anonymous questionnaires regarding passive SNS use, envy, and subjective well-being. Results revealed that the association between passive SNS use and low subjective well-being was mediated by envy. Moreover, the mediating effect of envy was moderated by gender, with the effect being stronger for females. These findings contribute to our understanding of how and for whom passive SNS use predict low subjective well-being, and suggest the need to take gender into account in prevention and intervention programs for problematic SNS use.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade social network sites (SNS) have changed the way people interact with each other, with both positive and negative effects (Gosling & Mason, 2015). One of the questions under debate is whether SNS use would be correlated with well-being. Some research has indicated that SNS use was associated with greater subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Kim & Lee, 2011; Wang, 2013). However, other research revealed SNS use was associated with lower subjective well-being and higher depression (Chou & Edge, 2012; Kross et al., 2013; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015). It now appears that specific patterns of SNS use, in particular whether individuals actively use SNS or passively use SNS, may explain these inconsistencies in the literature (Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja, & Buxmann, 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015). Recent research indicates that passive SNS use might undermine subjective well-being, but active use might not (Chen, Fan, Liu, Zhou, & Xie, 2016; Tandoc et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2015).

Why might the way individuals use SNS—actively or passively—be related to subjective well-being so differently? *Passive SNS use* refers

to browsing and consuming information without direct communication, for example by scrolling through news feeds or viewing friends' posts (e.g., selfies, status updates); *active SNS use* involves activities that facilitate direct communication with others, for example by commenting on friends' posts, posting status updates, and "liking" friends' status updates (Krasnova et al., 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015). The difference between active and passive SNS use is having or not having direct communication with others. This distinction might explain why passive SNS use appears to be detrimental to users' well-being. For instance, Burke, Marlow, and Lento (2010) found that passive SNS use, defined as consuming a greater level of Facebook friends' content, was associated with loneliness and reduced social capital, but active SNS use was associated with a greater feeling of social capital and lower loneliness. Verduyn et al. (2015) used experimental methods to cue people in the laboratory to use Facebook passively rather than actively, and found this manipulation led to declines in affective well-being over time to the end of day. As well, they replicated these findings in the field using experience-sampling techniques. Chen et al. (2016) found that passive SNS use was negatively associated with subjective well-being.

How might passive SNS use be related to declines in subjective well-being? Chen et al. (2016) examined the mediating effect of self-esteem in the association between passive SNS use and lower subjective well-being, and they found that passive SNS use may contribute to people's negative sense of self-worth, which in turn might affect subjective

\* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China.

E-mail address: [zhouzk@mail.ccn.edu.cn](mailto:zhouzk@mail.ccn.edu.cn) (Z.-K. Zhou).

<sup>1</sup> These two authors contributed equally to the study. They should be regarded as joint first authors.

well-being. However, not much is known about other mediating factors, or about moderators of the relationship between passive SNS use and subjective well-being.

In the current study we tested the mediating role of envy in the association between passive SNS use and subjective well-being. We also tested the moderating role of gender difference in this relation. A gender difference in subjective well-being has been found across eastern and western cultures (Burns & Machin, 2010; Lu, 2000), and males and females access happiness in different ways (Lu & Shih, 1997). Thus, this study tested a moderated mediation model in which passive SNS use was indirectly related to subjective well-being through envy, and tested whether there was gender difference in this indirect association.

### 1.1. The mediating role of envy

Envy is an unpleasant and often painful blend of feelings characterized by inferiority and resentment caused by a comparison with others who possess something we desire (Smith & Kim, 2007). Even though people are unwilling to admit to it, envy is a common emotion after SNS use, especially passive SNS use (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; Krasnova et al., 2013; Tandoc et al., 2015). Motivated by impression management, people's self-presentation in SNS is often positively skewed (Mehdizadeh, 2010). However, individuals who passively use SNS tend to have greater exposure to others' positive self-presentation, and in a process of social comparison they often feel that others live more happily than themselves (Chou & Edge, 2012). Passive SNS use involves both similarity to comparison standards and high personal relevance, and these two factors can fuel envy (Appel et al., 2016; Smith & Kim, 2007).

Importantly, the literature has considered envy as a psychosocial mechanism that may link the relationship between SNS use (especially passive SNS use) and poor psychological and social adaptation. When SNS use triggers feelings of envy, people experience psychological distress (Chen & Lee, 2013), feelings of depression (Appel et al., 2016; Tandoc et al., 2015), low life satisfaction (Krasnova et al., 2013), and low well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015). Other evidence also suggests that envy may mediate the association between passive SNS use and subjective well-being. For example, Verduyn et al. (2015) found that envy mediates the relationship between passive Facebook use and declines in how good people feel over time. Krasnova et al. (2013) found envy mediates the relationship between passive following on Facebook and life satisfaction. Tandoc et al. (2015) found envy mediates the relationship between Facebook surveillance and depression. Based on prior research, we hypothesized that envy might function as a mediator in the relationship between passive SNS use and subjective well-being among Chinese university students.

### 1.2. Gender differences: The moderating role of gender

Although passive SNS use may trigger envy and predict lower subjective well-being, it is possible that males and females are not equally influenced by its effects. Prior research has documented the important role of gender in people's psychosocial adaptation and well-being (Burns & Machin, 2010; Sun, Chan, & Chan, 2016), and the ways that males and females access happiness have been shown to be quite different (Lu & Shih, 1997). Additionally, the possibility of gender differences concerning the links between SNS use, envy and well-being is still an open research question (Appel et al., 2016). Thus, it is necessary to examine whether gender moderates the mediation effect of envy in the association between passive SNS use and subjective well-being.

Although the direct relationship between passive Facebook use and changes in well-being does not appear to be moderated by gender (Verduyn et al., 2015), the strength of the relationship between envy and subjective well-being might still be different across genders. Based on the peer-socialization model of sex-linked adjustment, females' social-cognitive styles involve connection-oriented goals and

interpersonal concerns; thus, social stress in the form of envy (Smith & Kim, 2007) may represent a particularly stronger threat to females' emotional well-being compared to males' (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Empirically, one study found that gender moderated the relationship between using social media for social comparison and depressive symptoms, with the association being particularly strong for females compared to males (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Gender may moderate the association between envy and subjective well-being, as social comparison can cause envy (Smith & Kim, 2007), and both depression and envy are closely related to well-being (Lin, 2015). This line of reasoning suggests that gender might have a moderating role in the association between envy and subjective well-being, with the link being stronger for females than males.

### 1.3. The current study

The current study tested whether the relationship between passive SNS use and subjective well-being among Chinese university students was mediated by envy. Furthermore, we tested whether this indirect relationship would be moderated by gender. Based on the literature review, the present study proposed an integrated model (see Fig. 1) and the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Passive SNS use would indirectly be related to subjective well-being through envy. High passive SNS use might be associated with higher envy, which in turn would be associated with lower subjective well-being.

**Hypothesis 2.** Gender would moderate the mediating effect of envy in the association between passive SNS use and subjective well-being. Specifically, the indirect association would be much stronger for female university students than male university students.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

A process of convenience sampling in six different majors from two large universities was used in this study. A total of 746 students were invited to participate; after excluding 39 invalid responses, 707 students completed surveys and filled out all of the forms, for a 94.77% effective rate. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 25 years old, with a mean age of 19.06 years ( $SD = 1.12$ ). Almost exactly half (49.93%) of the participants were females.

We recruited students by coming to their classes and sending paper invitations. We explained to all participants the requirements of this study using standard instructions and emphasized the authenticity, independence and integrity of all answers. After informed consent was obtained from the participants, they completed our online survey (<http://www.sojump.com/>) after class using computers or smart phones. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Scientific Research at the first author's institution.

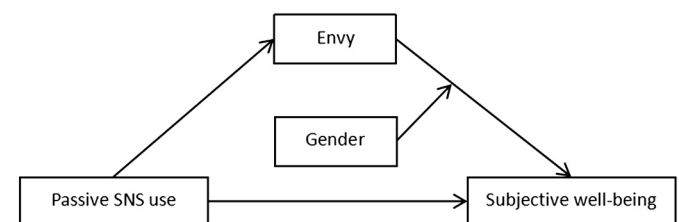


Fig. 1. Conceptual moderated mediation model of passive SNS use on subjective well-being.

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