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The fading affect bias shows positive outcomes at the general but not the individual level of analysis in the context of social media



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ABSTRACT

Unpleasant affect fades faster than pleasant affect (e.g., Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1997); this effect is referred to as the Fading Affect Bias (FAB; Walker, Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Thompson, 2003a). Research shows that the FAB is consistently related to positive/healthy outcomes at a general but not at a specific level of analysis based on event types and individual differences (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2013). Based on the positive outcomes for FAB and negative outcomes for social media (Bolton et al., 2013; Huang, 2010), the current study examined FAB in the context of social media events along with related individual differences. General positive outcomes were shown in the form of robust FAB effects across social media and non-social media events, a larger FAB for non-social media events than for social media events, negative correlations of FAB with depression, anxiety, and stress as well as a positive correlation of FAB with self-esteem. However, the lack of a negative correlation between FAB and anxiety for social media events in a 3-way interaction did not show positive outcomes at a specific level of analysis. Rehearsal ratings mediated the 3-way interaction. Implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Social media in the form of email, instant messenger, texting, Facebook, twitter, and snapchat bombards its consumers with brief messages that may limit the attention spans of the general population, and the fact that in person social sharing enhances positive/healthy outcomes (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004) makes this trend alarming. People have recently become dependent on social media and this form of communication and socialization may be problematic, as it is related to negative/unhealthy outcomes (Kraut et al., 1998; Kross et al., 2013; Woods & Scott, 2016). Research shows that engagement in social media is positively related to depression (Pantic, 2014) and anxiety (Vannucci, Flannery, & Ohannessian, 2016), and negatively related to self-esteem (Mehdizadeh, 2010). As research on autobiographical memory shows that unpleasant emotions fade faster than pleasant emotions (Holmes, 1970; Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1997) and this Fading Affect Bias (FAB; Walker, Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Thompson, 2003a) may be a positive/healthy outcome (i.e., Ritchie et al., 2014a; Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003b), the FAB may be negatively related to social media. The goal of the current study was to examine the relation of the FAB to healthy and unhealthy outcomes at general and specific levels of analysis in the context of social media.

1.1. Fading affect bias

After the advent of electricity but long before the invention of social media, researchers showed a tendency for a positivity bias in

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memory. This trend for a positivity bias has been shown in the form of more recordings of, and better recall for, pleasant events than unpleasant events (Jersild, 1931; Meltzer, 1930; Meltzer, 1931; Watters & Leeper, 1936). Other early researchers showed that unpleasant events lost their affective intensity more quickly than pleasant events (Cason 1932; Holmes, 1970). Walker et al. (1997) continued the work on fading affect using diary studies and they also showed that affect faded faster for unpleasant events than for pleasant events. These researchers also found that the differential fading of affect, later referred to as the fading affect bias (FAB) by Walker et al. (2003a), increased with retention intervals longer than 3 months. Gibbons, Lee, and Walker (2011) found that the FAB occurred between a half and full day after an event and it persisted for 3 months. The results of these two studies indicated that the FAB occurs within a day and it endures for 3 months, and increases thereafter.

A comprehensive review of FAB research discussed past findings and it showed that the FAB can be altered by events and individual differences (Skowronski, Walker, Henderson, & Bond, 2014). Other research on the FAB demonstrated that the effect was positively related to social rehearsals (Ritchie et al., 2006; Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Walker, 2004), and this relation was larger for interactive listeners than for non-responsive listeners (Muir, Brown, & Madill, 2014). This literature has also shown that dysphoria disrupts the FAB (Walker et al., 2003a), as does dispositional mood (Ritchie, Skowronski, Harnett, Wells, & Walker, 2009) and trait anxiety (Walker, Yancu, & Skowronski, 2014). Based on these findings, FAB researchers have contended that the FAB is a memory mechanism that enhances the pleasantness of life in most people and situations (Walker & Skowronski, 2009; Walker et al., 2003b). Ritchie et al. (2014a) showed that the FAB persisted across cultures and they argued that the FAB makes life pleasant by (1) enhancing the pursuit of pleasant experiences and (2) ameliorating the effects of unpleasant ones (Ritchie, Walker, Marsh, Hart, & Skowronski, 2014b).

Conversely, recent research has shown that the FAB can be related to negative/unhealthy outcomes for certain types of events (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014b). For example, Gibbons et al. (2013) showed that the FAB was positively related to alcohol consumption for alcohol events, which is not a healthy outcome. Other researchers found that narcissists reported low FAB for communal events (Ritchie et al., 2014b), even though these events can enhance mental and physical health via social interaction (Edwards, 2005; van der Houwen et al., 2010). Similarly, Gibbons, Hartzler, Hartzler, Lee, and Walker (2015) discovered a negative relation between the FAB and positive religious coping for religious events, which is another negative outcome. Recent FAB research produced another unhealthy finding; the FAB was negatively related to accepting death attitudes for death events (Gibbons, Fehr, Brantley, Lee, & Walker, 2016).

Although the FAB is generally positively related to positive/healthy outcomes and negatively related to negative/unhealthy outcomes, occasionally, it is positively related to negative outcomes and negatively related to positive outcomes for certain events. The novelty of these relations in the FAB literature makes their continued discovery important. As the FAB is negatively related to dysphoria (Walker et al., 2003a) and trait anxiety (Walker et al., 2014), and social media is positively related to depression, anxiety, and stress (Farahani, Kazemi, Aghamohamadi, Bakhtiarvand, & Ansari, 2011; Huang, 2010), we wanted to continue the specific analysis level exploration for novel relations between the FAB and relevant variables (e.g., dysphoria and anxiety) in the context of social media.

1.2. Social media is related to depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem

As technology continues to develop, social media use also grows with 76% of the adult population in the United States currently having a social media account (Pew Research Center., 2016). Social media use has been historically prominent in young audiences as well with 73% of teenagers aged 13–17 years old, and 72% of young adults aged 18–29 years old reporting a social media profile in 2010 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Social media provides a network for people to connect and interact with friends and strangers indirectly on social networking sites (SNS) that allow users to create and view personal profiles (Correa, Hinsley, & Zuniga, 2009). Social media is used by both genders, as college-aged men and women are equally likely to report a social media account and spending about 3 h on it each day (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The important issue is the effect of social media on its users.

Lin and Utz (2015) found that positive emotional posts on Facebook were more prevalent than negative emotional posts. Although this result potentially suggests a positive effect of Facebook on its users' emotions, these researchers did not examine the time for negative and positive emotional posts to affect users and the extent of those effects and these factors may account for the fact that most of the literature on social media shows negative emotional effects (Akin, 2012; Farahani et al., 2011; Kraut et al., 1998; Pantic et al., 2012; Woods & Scott, 2016). In other words, negative emotional posts may demand more time to produce their effects and/or their effects may be stronger than positive emotional posts, which would account for the literature demonstrating that social media produces anxiety and stress. For example, Farahani et al. (2011) asked 265 college-age undergraduate students to report their daily Facebook use as well as the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS). Facebook use showed a positive relation with anxiety and stress. In addition, Pantic et al. (2012) found a positive relation between social media and depression in a group of 160 high school students who completed a SNS-use questionnaire and the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). A study done by Lin et al. (2016) examined the association between social media use and depression among 1787 young adults. The results showed that participants who self-reported a high usage of social media showed a high level of depression. Tartari (2015) studied the potential benefits and risks of social media use. Though some benefits were produced, such as being able to find information, they were outweighed by the risks, which included depression and the potential for cyberbullying. Whereas some people perceive social media as a vehicle to receive support from other individuals, a study by Shensa, Sidani, Lin, Bowman, and Primack (2016) found that people who frequently used social media perceived less emotional support than people who did not use social media as frequently.

A recent meta-analysis by Bolton et al. (2013) showed that social media use produces internet addiction, which has been linked to depression, loneliness, and social anxiety. Depression and loneliness may also be antecedents to internet addiction, which means that

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