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The impact of self-regulatory states and traits on Facebook use: Priming materialism and social comparisons



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ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites like Facebook are an upcoming phenomenon of the modern age. The *Social Online Self-regulation Theory (SOS-T)* proposes that people use Facebook in order to self-regulate. Using Facebook they regulate their emotions and satisfy a variety of needs and motives. The study's aim was to provide first evidence for the theory by examining the influence of two self-regulatory variables (i.e. materialism and social comparison orientation). Using priming paradigms in two experiments ($N_1 = 228$; $N_2 = 239$), we could show that both variables increase Facebook consumption jointly and independently. Implications for theory building and applied settings are discussed and a forecast of future studies is given.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook or Instagram show a remarkable increase regarding their popularity over the last two decades, so that the social online platform Facebook has registered over 1.71 billion monthly active users in June 2016 (Facebook, 2016). The platform offers numerous possibilities of social interaction like sharing photographs, interacting through Facebook groups or chatting with friends. Thus, people's behavior on social networking sites becomes a new form of social interaction and in that way, it offers the opportunity to compare social online to offline behavior (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

Although social online behavior is a relatively new phenomenon, there are many studies that try to answer the question, why so many people are attracted to Facebook. By now, research identified quite a few social psychological variables to be associated with Facebook use. For example, studies demonstrated that people high in narcissism (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016; Mehdizadeh, 2010), high in extraversion (Ryan & Xenos, 2011) or high in trait materialism (Ozimek, Baer, & Förster, submitted) used Facebook more frequently than people low in these personality traits. Furthermore, high frequent Facebook use is associated with higher social

comparison orientation (Lee, 2014; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016), lower self-esteem (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008) and increased feelings of loneliness (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). While such studies suggest specific strategies (i.e., people use Facebook for becoming socially connected; cf. Ryan & Xenos, 2011), the *Social Online-Self-Regulation Theory (SOS-T, Ozimek et al., submitted)*, as an integrative model, approaches answering the “why-question” with one single superordinate, latent variable:

Regarding the *SOS-T*, people use Facebook to regulate themselves. Self-regulation involves the pursuit of individual goals (Higgins, 1997; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Ozimek et al., submitted), and Facebook can serve as a means to reach more general end-states. People's individual goals can be related to many different contents such as increasing social contact, presenting oneself, improving self-esteem or seeking help for specific problems, to give only some examples. Some relations are less immediate. For example, some people may think that via social networking, Facebook could help to improve their career, gain prestige, or gain status friends (Ozimek et al., submitted); in other words, they may want to satisfy materialistic needs. Note that for our model, it is irrelevant if such attempts are successful, rather people make use of it because they think they can attain their goals this way. A theoretical model is presented in Fig. 1 (see Appendix A). In contrast to other studies, using solely correlational designs, *SOS-T* predicts causal relations.

As a start to collect evidence for our more general model, we examine the impact of two prominent self-regulatory variables on

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people's Facebook use by using priming logic: Materialism and social comparison orientation. More specifically, in order to test the causal influence of the variables on Facebook consume, we activated materialistic goals and people's social comparison orientation situationally and compared them with control groups that were not primed. This is, to our knowledge, the first study using an experimental design for assessing the impact of social comparisons and materialistic concerns on Facebook use.

Thus, our study has two main purposes: First, we tested the SOS-T, predicting means-goals-relationships between Facebook use and self-regulatory strategies. Secondly, our experimental designs deviate from many studies on Facebook consumption that are merely correlational in nature, and is indeed one of the first approaches examining the *causal* influence of materialistic goals and social comparison on Facebook use.

Additionally, there is a lack of experimental studies examining Facebook use and personality. Therefore, with our study we hope to inspire researchers to conduct more experimental studies in the field of social media research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Materialism

People scoring high on materialism are described as people who (1) try competitively to have more than others, (2) believe that happiness lies in possessions, (3) have an excessive desire to multiply their possessions in form of objects, human beings or social memories, (4) attach more value to things than to human beings and (5) are characterized by uncertainty (Ger & Belk, 1996). There is some evidence showing, that this behavior and basic belief about life and individual goals is negatively correlated with variables of mental and also physical well-being (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014; Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009; Ryan et al., 1999). Whereas some perceive materialism as attitudes, more recent models take a self-regulatory approach, suggesting that it is a basic *motive*¹ that triggers *goals*; such goals can be achieved by certain *means* (Förster, 2015; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). We suggest that materialistic people try to achieve materialistic *goals* via means of Facebook use. For example, they may increase professional success or social capital through networking or presenting themselves to others.

Materialism is a classic construct that has its starting point of research in the 19th century (Marx, 2008; Veblen, 1899) and received attention in psychology especially by Erich Fromm's work (Fromm, 1976). In a nutshell, Fromm based his model on psychoanalytic and Marxist thinking and included many *normative* and *moralistic* considerations. For him, a materialistic attitude is *unhealthy* and it would necessarily lead to *unethical behavior*. While materialism is still considered by many as a negative influence on life satisfaction and well-being (see for a review Förster, 2015), recent views try to describe materialistic behavior as functional in certain situations. For example, shopping may help people to increase self-worth or self-esteem, may help them to show a certain identity or may simply lift their moods. Even though the effect of such behavior may be short-lived, such self-regulatory strategies have been shown to be reasons for people's actual materialistic behavior. From a self-regulatory perspective, such behavior seems less condemnable, but rather appears as a means to satisfy basic needs, such as affiliation, good mood or high self-esteem.

What would be the added value of a self-regulatory framework? An advantage of self-regulation approaches may be the

involvement of well-established general variables (or "principles", see Förster, Liberman, & Friedman, 2007) that drive behavior in many life domains and thus place certain aspects of human life into more general and integrative frameworks: among them are principles of goal hierarchies, substitutability of means, equifinality and multifinality (see Kruglanski et al., 2002). Applying self-regulatory approaches to materialism, materialists use specific *means* in order to reach certain *goals*. Goal systems are hierarchical. For example, shopping can be a means to the end of gaining status and further gaining status may be a means to the end of becoming happy. Applied to materialism, goal hierarchies can be shown, for example, when people in order to accumulate possessions, objectify other people (Ger & Belk, 1996; Khanna & Kasser, 2001). "Objectification" – is a process "in which one experiences [...] others as objects, commodities or things, rather than as subjects with their own experiences, perspectives and feelings" (Laing, 1969 as cited in Khanna & Kasser, 2001; see Gervais, Bernard, Klein, & Allen, 2013; for a recent approach).

From a self-regulatory perspective, goals such as getting affiliated with others are further used as means in order to attain materialistic goals. A yet unpublished paper by Khanna and Kasser (2001) shows that high materialistic people tend to objectify others, use them to reach personal goals, are less emphatic and fell less attached to other people. Interestingly, Facebook is an ideal platform to collect and multiply one's own (Facebook) friends. Based on the apparent relation between materialism and objectification, one may even suggest that for materialists Facebook friends could be seen as *digital objects*. Furthermore, as a principle, *equifinality* applies insofar as various means can support goal pursuit in many situations. I might, for example, become happy by shopping or by playing with my son. This implies substitutability – if a counselor, for example, observes that the shopping behavior does not really make a person happy, he might try to suggest other means to that end. Means can also be *multifinal*: Biking to the work place may, for example, at the same time serve health, economic and ecological goals. It is probably this feature or materialistic behaviors that make them so attractive: getting a fancy pair of shoes may at the same time increase mood, signal status, show a part of one's identity and much more. In this article, we do not aim at examining all the aspects of our self-regulatory model; however, we will introduce it as a starting point that was thought to allow a different perspective on materialism and social networking.

We hope that in the future, it will stimulate more research questions. Notably, in the past decades, self-regulatory models helped to increase our understanding in a variety of domains such as health (Leventhal, Leventhal, & Contrada, 1998), consumer's behavior (Avnet & Higgins, 2006), decision making (Latham & Locke, 1991), intergroup behavior (Sassensberg & Woltin, 2008), to name but a few. Thus, our more general aim is to introduce self-regulation to social media use, and to generate and test some new and innovative research questions from that perspective.

Nevertheless, one may wonder whether existing research already suggests causal links between materialism and social media use. To the best of our knowledge, this is not the case. Some studies indicate that materialism is generally connected with media use in the domain of television consumption (Richins, 1987; for a replication with a German sample see Bak & Keßler, 2011). In addition, a study could show that this relationship can be partly explained by the occurrence of commercials in TV and that the association between materialism and TV consumption is only significant when participants appraise the commercials as realistic and authentic (Richins, 1987). This might not be surprising, given that commercials illustrate the materialists' desired end-state of being happy and successful through shopping (Dittmar, 2005; Kasser & Kanner, 2004). However, a shortcoming of these studies is their

¹ We regard motives as abstract, more general goals.

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