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Materialists on Facebook: the self-regulatory role of social comparisons and the objectification of Facebook friends

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Abstract

In this study, we examine chronic materialism as a possible motive for Facebook usage. We test an explanatory mediation model predicting that materialists use Facebook more frequently, because they compare themselves to others, they objectify and instrumentalize others, and they accumulate friends. For this, we conducted two online surveys (N_1 = 242, N_2 = 289) assessing demographic variables, Facebook use, social comparison, materialism, objectification and instrumentalization. Results confirm the predicted mediation model. Our findings suggest that Facebook can be used as a means to an end in a way of self-regulatory processes, like satisfying of materialistic goals. The findings are the first evidence for our *Social Online Self-regulation Theory (SOS-T),* which contains numerous predictions that can be tested in the future.

Keywords: Psychology, Information science

1. Introduction

1.1. The phenomenon of Facebook

In the last two decades social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook or Twitter have shown a remarkable increase in popularity and users. Facebook provides a platform to millions of users for various social interactions, such as sharing photographs, interacting through Facebook groups or chatting with friends.

Due to the various possibilities of social interaction and the high number of active users, Facebook offers a new opportunity to examine social behavior (Wilson et al., 2012). There are many studies that have investigated the different factors and causes as to why so many people use Facebook.

In order to identify more *basic* motives for using Facebook, social psychologists have identified the *need for self-presentation* as one of the main motives of Facebook users for presenting themselves as positively as possible and to impress other people (Krämer and Winter, 2008). Some personality traits may moderate effects – for example narcissists seem to use Facebook for self-glorification via presenting their ideal-self within their profiles (Mehdizadeh, 2010). In addition, people use Facebook to stay in touch with their friends or groups (Back et al., 2010; Buss, 2012; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Thus, another motive for using Facebook could be social interaction and the *need to belong*. Furthermore, some studies have shown that people with low self-esteem use Facebook as a vehicle for social interaction and to increase their self-esteem (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Steinfield et al., 2008). In contrast, other studies questioned whether online friendships really are capable of increasing self-esteem effectively because it was found that people with low self-esteem are able to increase their so-called bridging social capital (i.e., superficial friendships) by using Facebook more frequently, but a clear relationship to self-esteem could not be found (Ellison et al., 2007; Valkenburg et al., 2006).

However, with respect to social interactions, using Facebook does not have uniformly positive effects. For example, in romantic relationships, high Facebook activity can lead to envy because sharing photos with opposite-sex users could be interpreted ambivalently by one's partner resulting in controlling and tracing the partner's activities. In fact, a positive relationship between using Facebook and envy in partnerships has been reported in literature (Muise et al., 2009). Altogether, research shows positive outcomes and motives for using Facebook such as the possibility of *positive self-presentation* and *social interaction,* but also negative outcomes like envy in partnerships.

Additionally, *social comparison* could be a motive for using Facebook, since it offers a perfect platform for comparing oneself with others. Users have easy access to all kinds of personal information about others via their profiles, and can also look at relationship status, number of friends or profile pictures, to name a few.