Does Happiness in the Cyberspace Promote That in the Real-World?
Testing on Reciprocal Relationships Using Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Modeling

Sen-Chi Yu, Department of Counseling and Applied Psychology, National Taichung University of Education, Taichung, Taiwan
Chien Chou, Institute of Education, National Chiao Tung University, Hsinchu, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

To examine reciprocal relationships between “virtual world”-context cyberspace positive-psychological states (CPSs) and “real world”-context positive-psychological states (PSs), this study conducted a two-wave panel design with about two-semester interval on 251 Taiwan college freshmen and analyzed the data using cross-lagged structural equation modeling. The analytical results show that CPSs have causal priority over PSs, but not vice versa. Therefore, the cyberspace PSs of the former stage influenced the real-world PSs during the latter stage. These results indicate that college students tended to incorporate their cyberspace positive-psychological states into their “real world.” The authors have concluded that cyberspace positive-psychological states do not substitute for and, indeed, contribute to real-world states.

Keywords: Cyber Psychology, Internet Use, Positive Psychology, Structural Equation Modeling, Well-Being

1. INTRODUCTION

A great deal of effort has been invested in studying the negative aspects of psychology, such as depression, and anxiety, while comparatively little research has been performed on determining the means to improve happiness and wellbeing. During his tenure as chairman of the APA (American Psychological Association), Seligman (2002) proposed the concept of positive psychology (PP) (also called authentic happiness), integrating studies on happiness and well-being to explore what constitutes success in life and how well-being can be enhanced.

PP is a new area of psychology that focuses on studying how life can become pleasant, engaged, and meaningful. PP has flourished during the last decade, and PP theory has been

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applied in various fields such as counseling and education (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Moreover, Yu & Chou (2009) proposed cyberspace positive psychology (CPP), which expands the application of PP to cyberspace. Insofar, cyberspace, being similar to the real world, fosters positive-psychological states. Studies have shown that the theoretical framework of PP exists in both real-world and virtual contexts (Yu & Chou, 2009; Yu, Chou, & Lin, 2009; Yu, Chou, Lin, & Wang, 2009; Yu & Hsu, 2012); People can foster positive psychology in both the real world and virtual worlds.

The internet is an essential part of modern life and one that consumes more and more of our time. The online world is an important psychological arena as well as a key source of happiness and well-being (Yu & Chou, 2009). Many studies have explored differences between the cyber-world and real life with regard to personality traits, altruistic behaviour, and group dynamics (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007). This study explored whether gaining a sense of happiness or well-being online can enhance overall satisfaction with life. If so, then building well-being in cyberspace can enhance overall well-being. In other words, the internet is an important medium in which to improve psychological health as well as a channel for guidance and counselling. Most studies on internet use and well-being are cross-sectional surveys. In contrast, we conducted a longitudinal study to explore the causal relationship between well-being in cyberspace and in real-life.

Concerning the demographic composition of various Internet users, college freshmen are a suitable sample for this study because they tend to adopt the Internet early in life and be heavy users of it; thus, they may have a higher likelihood of exhibiting cyberspace positive-psychological states. Moreover, the freshmen year is a critical period for developing CPSs since freshmen typically finds themselves shifting from having only restricted access to the Internet to having ubiquitous and free Internet access throughout their campus and in their dormitories. In Taiwan, the average internet usage is less than three hour per week for high school students due to overwhelming tests and homework for preparing for the College Entrance Exam. However, as they pass the entrance exam and become college freshmen, the average internet usages increase almost nine times to 27.26 hours per week (Tasi & Tasi, 2010; Yu & Hsu, 2012). Different from the limited Internet access of high school years, the Internet is part of the daily routine of college students, making this group more likely than average to exhibit positive-psychological states and have pleasant, engaged, and meaningful lives online.

Cross-lagged structural equation modeling (CL-SEM) is the most recommended among various statistical methods for analyzing reciprocal causality. Traditionally, the reciprocal relationships between two variables are tested via cross-lagged panel correlation (Cook & Campbell, 1979), but this correlation-based methodology can yield misleading results when a third, highly correlated variable exists (Taris, 2000). The regression-based cross-lagged path model is a better method for solving this problem. However, the cross-lagged path model remains problematic since it assumes that all measures are error-free, resulting in attenuated relation estimations. Accordingly, CL-SEM is the most desirable method because SEM accounts for measurement errors and simultaneously estimates measurement and structural paths.

This study designed a two-wave, approximately 10-month interval, cross-lagged structural equation model to test the reciprocal relationships between PSs and CPSs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Positive Psychology

Introduction

Positive psychology (PP), proposed by Seligman (2002), is a recent branch of psychology that integrates related studies about well-being and happiness. PP is a science about pleasant, engaged, and meaningful lives (Seligman et al., 2005). Positive psychologists seek to make hu-
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