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Exploring the Effect of Personality and Stranger Connections on Instagram Use

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that the relationship between personality and Facebook use is mediated by the need for belonging and self-presentation. It is uncertain, however, whether these relationships also hold for other social networking sites (SNSs), for example, Instagram. This image-sharing platform provides a unique opportunity for fulfilling belonging and self-presentation needs. The online survey was completed by 404 participants (80% female, age range 18-63 years, Median = 21 years). As hypothesized, personality (extraversion and agreeableness) predicted belonging behaviours (liking, commenting, and tagging others), and extraversion and neuroticism predicted self-presentation behaviours (likelihood of posting on particular days, and at specific times of day) on Instagram. Stranger connections moderated the relationship between agreeableness and commenting behaviours. Findings highlight the need to explore SNSs beyond Facebook and consider the role of audience and personality on SNS behaviours.

KEYWORDS
Belonging, Facebook, Instagram, Personality, Self-Presentation, Social Media, Stranger Connections

INTRODUCTION

The ubiquity of online social network sites (SNSs) is evidenced in the 1.01 billion daily active Facebook users (Facebook, 2015), 400 million Instagram users (Instagram, 2015), 1 billion YouTube users (YouTube, 2015) and 320 million monthly active Twitter users (Twitter, 2015). SNSs, allow users to create public or semi-public profiles that identify a list of other profiles to which they are connected. Users can also view each other’s connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The data generated from these interactions provide a unique opportunity for researchers to examine the effect of public social networks on individuals’ social behaviours.

Despite key differences between SNSs, the sustained popularity of Facebook has led researchers to focus on it as the primary example of SNSs (Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012). Research investigating motivations for Facebook-use has identified two key factors: a need to belong and a need for self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

The “Belongingness Hypothesis” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) states that humans experience a drive to form and maintain positive relationships. These relationships extend beyond social contact and are characterised by sustained positive exchanges with desired individuals. A sense of belonging is associated with better health outcomes (Tomaka, Thompson & Palacios, 2006), greater life and relationship satisfaction (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi & Cummins, 2008), reduced stress (Young, Russell & Powers, 2004) and reduced loneliness (Baskin, Wampold, Quintana & Enright,
SNSs provide a platform for maintaining relationships and sustaining that sense of belonging amongst communities that span geographical and temporal distances. Facebook use, in particular, has been shown to predict social capital, facilitate networking and community and support relationship maintenance (Steinfeld, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). It also acts as a buffer against loneliness (Lou, Yan, Nickerson & McMorris, 2012). However, these benefits seem to be moderated by the extent of active participation on Facebook (Burke, et al., 2010) and personality (Seidman, 2013).

The second motivator for Facebook use is self-presentation and, relatedly, impression management. Weishbuch, et al., (2009) showed that impressions formed about a person’s online profile predicts their perceived offline likability. On Facebook, there is both a temptation and an opportunity to present a particular - and positive - impression of oneself (Back, et al., 2010). In a survey of undergraduate students, over 80% reported removing the link between their profile and photos posted by others of them (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009). Reasons included unflattering photo and photos depicting behaviours that the student did not want publicised. Peluchette and Karl (2010) also found that the image that students intended to portray on social media (e.g. wild or sexually appealing in contrast to hardworking) affected the amount of inappropriate content they posted. Despite this selective self-presentation, Facebook profiles portray an accurate, though positive, representation of the user. Back, et al., (2010) asked participants to rate their current and ideal self on five personality variables. Independent observers then rated participants’ Facebook pages on these same variables. Researchers found that observer ratings were predicted by actual-self ratings and not ideal-self ratings. This suggests that SNSs are used to portray users’ actual rather than ideal selves and highlights that although self-presentation strategies are used to portray a positive self-image, this image is not too far from the truth. Similarly, Hall and Pennington (2012) found that personality traits could be accurately gleaned from information presented on Facebook.

FACTORS AFFECTING SELF-PRESENTATION AND SENSE OF BELONGING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Audience

Social networks on Facebook tend to comprise of individuals that the user has interacted with, or has an ongoing relationship with, offline (Manago, Taylor & Greenfield, 2012). The opportunity to verify online claims through offline interactions suggest that there is motivation for Facebook profiles to depict an accurate representation of the user. Interviews with students and subsequent analyses of their Facebook profiles showed that students were selective in what they presented in online non-anonymous platforms and that this content differed to that which would be found on anonymous discussion boards (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008).

The importance of audience is also shown in research examining the role of stranger connections on the benefits/disadvantages of SNS use (Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015). Lup et al., (2015) found that for individuals who were connected with the highest numbers of strangers on Instagram, greater SNS use was related to greater depressive symptoms. This relationship was not evident for users who were connected with fewer strangers. The authors suggested that interactions with strangers exacerbate attribution error. Viewing a stranger’s positive posts about their life, users are more likely to attribute this to the stranger’s internal attributes - they have a better life than me because they’re better than me. In contrast, conclusions drawn about friends’ positive posts is tempered by a knowledge of other, potentially less positive aspects of the friend and their life. When engaging in social comparison, then, stranger interactions are more likely to elicit negative feelings (Lup et al., 2015).

Self-verification theory also predicts that stranger interactions would affect self-presentation on social media (Swann, 1999). Its research suggest that self-enhancement strategies are more likely to be used when the strength of the relationship is not certain (i.e. in relationships with strangers; Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012). Therefore, it would be expected that more self-enhancement strategies