

NEGATIVE TRAITS PREDICT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Anxiety, Self-Criticism, and Evaluativeness as Predictors of Social Media Use in Females

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Abstract

Social media is extremely popular; however, the underlying motivations to use it may not always be positive. This study aims to establish whether anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness predict an increase in social media use across genders. Because males and females use social media for different purposes, it is hypothesized that the three traits will lead to increased social media use in females, but not in males. This study consisted of 509 participants who filled out an online survey. The results found that anxiety and self-criticism did not predict increased social media use in males, however evaluativeness did. In females, all three predicted increased social media use. These findings suggest that females may be using social media as a coping mechanism.

Anxiety, Self-Criticism, and Evaluativeness as Predictors of Social Media Use in Females

In 2005, only 8% of adult internet users were active on social networking websites (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). This number has grown exponentially: as of September 2013, almost three-quarters (73%) of online adults use social media sites, according to the Pew Research Institute. Despite widespread appeal, social media use may be associated with adverse traits. This study addresses whether three negative attributes, anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness, motivate people to use social media. If these qualities do encourage use, it is reasoned that social media may be a negative experience for some individuals. Furthermore, this study will address whether anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness similarly influence males and females to use social media.

Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are a relatively new phenomenon that are dramatically influencing the way people develop and construct their personal identities (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). According to Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris (2011), the creation of Facebook has “revolutionized” the way college students interact and form connections (p. 183). Therefore, understanding why individuals use social media is an important topic of research. Previous research highlights the ‘social presence theory,’ suggesting that individuals use social media to communicate and connect with others (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). Thus far, little research has examined how an individual’s negative attributes influence their use of social media. This study will explore the relationship between males’ and females’ levels of anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness and the extent of their social media use.

One variable that may encourage social media use is anxiety. According to past research, Facebook may serve as a valuable resource to anxious individuals because it is a platform to interact with others void of face-to-face interaction (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, &

Marrington, 2013). Therefore, anxious individuals may be inclined to spend more time on social media because it allows the experience of connectedness behind the safety of a computer screen.

Findings on anxiety and social media use relate closely to findings on self-criticism and online interaction. An individual who is self-critical likely has low self-esteem, as self-esteem is defined as the amount one likes or approves of oneself (Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013). Research suggests that individuals with low self-esteem may attempt to compensate for personal disapproval by frequently using social media (Lee, Moore, E. Park & S. Park, 2012). The present study aims to go beyond self-esteem and examine how self-criticism affects social media use across genders.

Lastly, evaluativeness may also lead to more social media usage. Haferkamp & Kramer (2011) argued that social media use leads individuals to compare themselves to others, as the sites provide “a perfect basis for social comparison processes” (p. 309). This study examines whether the trait of evaluativeness may inspire initial social media usage and whether this motivation is applicable across genders.

The present research evaluates gender differences because males and females differ in their motivation to use social media and in their actions on social media sites (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Research indicates that females are more likely to use social media to maintain interpersonal communication, whereas males are more task-focused online (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Therefore, it is possible that anxiety, self-criticism and evaluativeness may distinctively influence the use of social media by males and females.

This study predicts that high levels of anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness will predict more daily social media use in females, but not in males. Because males and females use social media for different reasons, it is presumed that the effects of these three traits will influence the two genders in different manners.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants in this study were 509 friends and family members of students in an experimental psychology course at Tulane University. Participants were primarily female (81.5%), employed (56.0%), and educated (90.1% completed or plan to complete at least a Bachelor's Degree). The large majority (85.1%) were 29 years or younger. Approximately half were in a romantic relationship (45.6%) and a few were parents (13.8%). Finally, participants were geographically dispersed (26.9% originally from the Southern U.S., 38.5% from the Northeast, 15.5% from the Midwest, 14.1% from the West, and 4.9% from outside the U.S.).

Students in the course created a survey of 128 items, measuring various constructs, and participants responded to the survey items online through Qualtrics.com. For this set of analyses, only the following variables were analyzed: anxiety, self-criticism, evaluativeness, and social media use.

Measures

Anxiety. This variable was designed to measure the amount of general anxiety experienced by participants in the past month. They were asked to respond to the question: "How often have you felt anxious, worried, or upset during the past month?" Answers ranged from 0 (never) to 10 (always), with higher scores indicating more frequent feelings of anxiety.

Self-Criticism. This variable was designed to measure the degree of criticism felt by participants regarding their individual flaws. They were asked to respond to the question: "Are you disapproving and judgmental of your personal flaws?" Answers ranged from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely), with higher scores corresponding to higher levels of personal dissatisfaction.

Evaluativeness. This variable was designed to measure how frequently participants

evaluate themselves based on their perceptions of others. They were asked to respond to the question: “How often do you compare yourself to others?” Answers ranged from 0 (never) to 10 (always), with higher scores indicating more frequent comparison.

Social Media Use. This variable was designed to measure how much time participants spend on social media sites daily. They were asked to respond to the question: “How many hours per day do you spend on social media websites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)?” Answers ranged from 0 to 16 hours.

Results

In general, female participants in this study reported slightly above average levels of anxiety ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 2.45$), and 4.3% of the total female participants ($n = 415$) reported feeling anxious, worried or upset ‘always’ within the past month. Males reported slightly lower levels of anxiety ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 2.61$), and only 1.1% of the total male participants ($n = 94$) reported feeling constantly anxious. Females also reported higher levels of self-criticism than males (females: $M = 6.80$, $SD = 2.55$; males: $M = 5.94$, $SD = 2.74$), indicating that female participants were more critical of their personal flaws. Among the females studied, 17.8% responded that they are ‘extremely’ disapproving of their personal flaws, compared to 8.5% of the male participants. Similarly, female participants reported higher levels of evaluativeness (females: $M = 6.61$, $SD = 2.51$; males: $M = 5.62$; $SD = 2.71$), suggesting they are more likely to compare themselves to others than males.

Additionally, female participants were found to spend more time on social media than males. Among the females studied, only 2.9% reported zero hours of daily social media use, as opposed to 11.7% of the total males. On average, females in this study spent about three hours on social media daily ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 2.32$), whereas male participants averaged roughly two hours daily ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.33$).

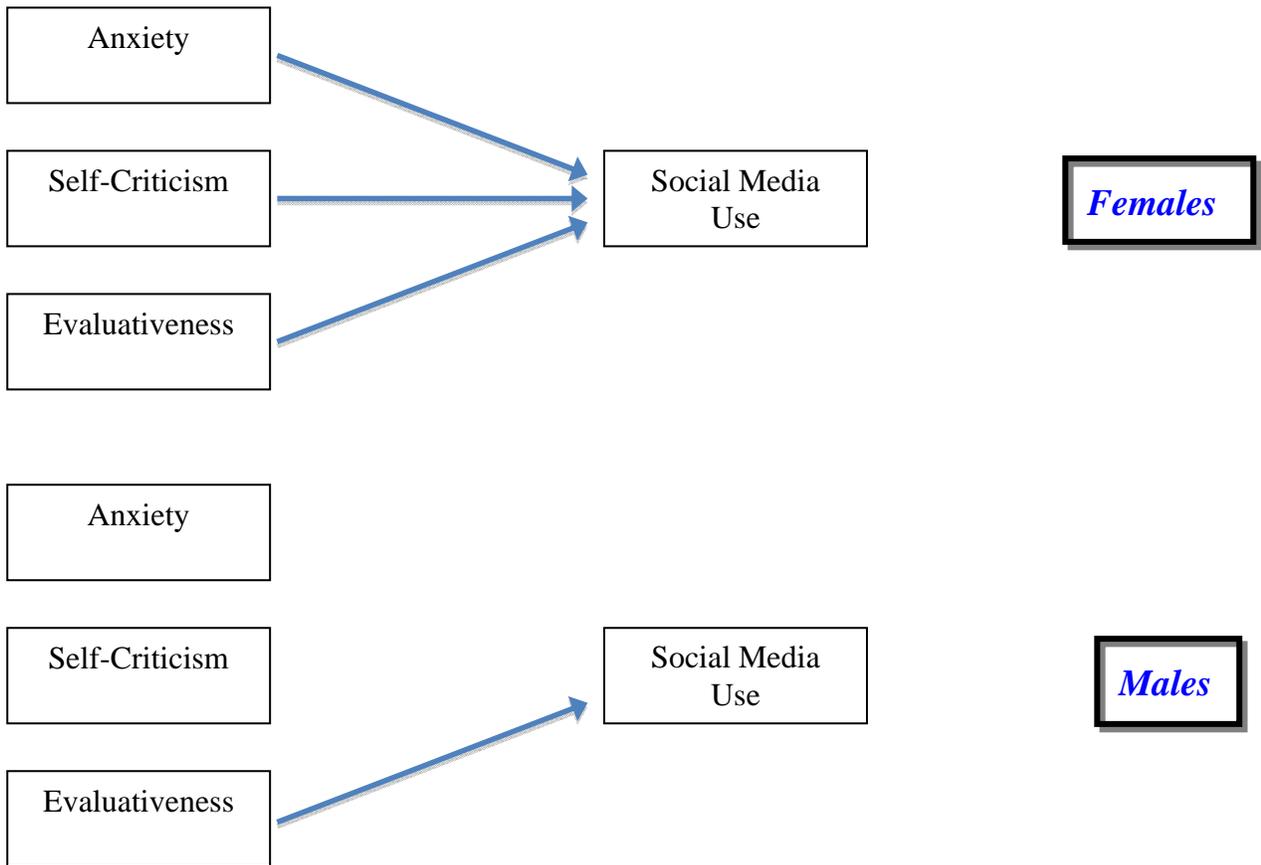
In order to test the hypotheses that anxiety, evaluativeness and self-criticism predict the amount of social media use in females but not in males, individual Pearson correlations were conducted. In females, anxiety had a small, direct effect on social media usage, indicating that females who are anxious are slightly more likely to spend more time on social media ($r = .25, p = .00$). In males, no relationship was found between anxiety and social media use ($r = .12, p = .23$).

Additionally, self-criticism showed a very small relationship with social media use in females ($r = .098, p = .045$), suggesting that female participants' degree of disapproval and judgment regarding personal traits slightly predicts the amount of time they spend on social media. In males, self-criticism was not found to be related to social media use ($r = .03, p = .80$).

Surprisingly, findings on evaluativeness in males did reveal a small, direct relationship between self-comparison and social media use ($r = .22, p = .04$). Similarly, evaluativeness showed a small, direct effect on social media use in females ($r = .19, p = .00$). These findings indicate that both males and females who frequently compare themselves to others are more likely to spend more time on social media.

To examine the overall impact of anxiety, evaluativeness, and self-criticism on females' use of social media, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Together the three traits account for a small proportion of the amount of social media use in females ($R = .27, R^2 = .072$). Therefore, the three combined traits explain 7.2% of amount of social media use in females.

A multiple regression analysis was also conducted to examine the combined effect of anxiety, evaluativeness, and self-criticism on social media use in males. The test resulted in a smaller, but still important, outcome ($R = .24, R^2 = .055$). Therefore, 5.5% of social media usage in males can be attributed to the overall impact of anxiety, evaluativeness and self-criticism.



Discussion

Understanding why people use social media sites is important because the sites are widely used and dramatically affect the way individuals interact and form connections (Kalpidou et al., 2011). Past research suggests that individuals use social media to form social connections (Cheung et al., 2011). However, social media use may be motivated by undesirable personal attributes. The present study analyzes whether anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness lead to an increase in social media use in males and females. It was expected that the three traits would

lead to more social media use in females, but not in males, because males and females use social media for different purposes (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2011). Findings in this study indicate that anxiety, self-criticism, and evaluativeness all slightly encourage social media use in females. In males, anxiety and self-criticism showed no relationship to social media use. However, the hypothesis that males would not be affected by the three attributes was not confirmed, as evaluativeness was found to motivate males to use social media more frequently.

Evaluativeness may prompt males to use social media sites because they provide an avenue for social comparison. Haferkamp & Kramer (2011) found that males who were shown online profiles of highly successful men felt subsequently worse about their career status, indicating that males do exhibit evaluative tendencies on social media sites. Whereas anxiety and self-criticism are not obviously maintained through social media use, self-comparison is perhaps unavoidable online. Therefore, both males and females who instinctively compare themselves to others can satisfy this tendency through social media sites.

The findings that anxiety and self-criticism motivate females to spend more time on social media are of high importance. Because social media is an expanding phenomenon, anxious and self-critical females may increasingly spend an excessive amount of time online and be less likely to reach out and make connections in person. Face-to-face connections have been shown to lead to more social support than online connections (Kim & Lee, 2011). Consequently, since anxious and critical females spend more time online, they may be less likely to receive authentic social support, which could potentially help diminish their anxiety and self-criticism. Therefore, the results of this study should encourage self-critical or anxiety-prone females to reflect on the amount of time they spend on social media, and to balance this time with genuine in-person socializing.

Despite this study's important implications, one should express caution before generalizing the results. The sample in this study was largely college-aged, educated females, all of whom had access to the internet. The lack of diversity in the sample is likely an outcome of the researchers who distributed the survey, all of whom were psychology students at Tulane University. Therefore, the results of this study should not readily be applied to people without a higher education or older individuals. Furthermore, the gender differences found in this study may lack validity due to the underrepresentation of male participants. Future research should address this problem by using a more representative sample.

A further limitation of this study is that it does not address whether anxiety, evaluativeness and self-criticism are the cause or the result of social media use in females. Future research should address this directionality problem, perhaps by conducting a longitudinal study.

Despite the limitations, the findings in this study are important because they imply that people can be negatively influenced to use social media. This discovery indicates that despite its widespread usage, social media use may not be a positive experience for some individuals. Future research should address this by studying whether social media sites have addictive qualities, as this would help explain why individuals continue to use the sites despite adverse effects. Additionally, the implications of this research suggest that females may be using social media as a coping mechanism. Future research should examine if people are indeed attempting to deal with personal problems by using social media, and if so, whether social media provides an effective coping mechanism.

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