

Chapter 48

Personality and Social Media Use

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ABSTRACT

Research on digital media has mostly paid attention to users' demographics, motivations, and efficacy, but with increasingly popular web tools like social media, it is important to study more stable psychological characteristics such as users' personality traits, as they may significantly affect how people use the Web to communicate and socialize. Relying on the "Big Five Framework" as a theoretical approach, this chapter explores such relationships. Survey data from a national sample of U.S. adults show that more extraverted people are more likely to use social networking sites, instant messaging, and video chats, while those more open to new experiences tend to use social networking sites more frequently. Also, emotional stability is a negative predictor of social networking site use. That is, individuals who are more anxious and unstable tend to rely on these sites. When looking at a specific use of social media—to create political content—emotional stability was a negative predictor, whereas extraversion had a positive impact. These findings confirm the usefulness of combining explorations of personality and digital media usage.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the Web increasingly opens more opportunities and spaces for people to interact, socialize, promote their work, create, and share material online. By early 2012, 48 hours of video were uploaded every minute to YouTube (YouTube, 2012). In 2011 the number of people in the U.S. using a social networking site had

doubled from 2008; nearly half of adults and 59% of Internet users has used a social networking site like Facebook or LinkedIn at least once (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011).

In the early stages of the Internet, people went online seeking the anonymity it offered (McKenna & Bargh, 2000); now they use the Web to communicate, socialize with people they do know and expand their network (Jones & Fox, 2009). The

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tools that allow these connections are social media including social networking sites, microblogging, video-sharing sites, and blogs (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Jones & Fox, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The increasing interactivity and users' involvement in the Web necessitates exploring the types of people who are more likely to rely on these participatory tools and their psychological characteristics.

The literature on digital media has paid significant attention to the users' demographics and some of their psychological characteristics such as motivation, Internet self-efficacy, and life satisfaction. These psychological characteristics, however, may change over time. People may become more or less motivated, efficacious and satisfied with life. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the role of more stable psychological traits such as people's personalities. In other words, how dispositional and stable features rooted in biology may have a significant effect on the way people engage with digital media tools and social media in particular.

Uncovering the factors that prevent or facilitate the adoption of social media enables web content producers and policymakers interested in increasing media access to have a better understanding of how to make the Internet more approachable to different kinds of users. Also, marketing professionals are increasingly using social media to connect with audiences. Therefore, understanding the characteristics of people who are likely to engage in these types of online media more intensely may help marketers to understand—and reach—their audience.

One of these characteristics is people's personality. Personality refers to a stable psychological characteristic that predicts a wide range of attitudes and behaviors such as people's music tastes, clothing, speech, and more. In the past two decades, psychology scholars have reached a working consensus that most individual differences in personality can be categorized in five

major domains: extraversion, emotional stability, openness to new experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1997; John & Srivastava, 1999).

Thanks to the development of this framework, labeled the "Big Five," research on digital media has devoted attention to the relationship between people's personality traits and digital media use. In the beginning, scholars investigated the links between personality and Internet usage in general (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel & Fox, 2002; Hamburger & Artzi, 2000). Currently, this line of research is focusing on specific uses of digital media, including social media applications (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010; Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008).

Although research on personality and digital media is looking more thoroughly at specific social media applications (e.g., Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Kalmus, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel, & Siibak, 2009), it does not take into account that most people are driven by a purpose when they engage with social media. They may interact to do some business, meet people, express their culture or thoughts, or promote their work (Correa & Jeong, 2011). Thus, it is relevant to move the discussion forward by investigating more thoroughly the links between users' personality and purposeful forms of participation using social media (Bachmann, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013).

Using a national sample of U.S. adults, in this chapter we explore the relationship between people's personality and social media use in general. In doing so, we look at the Big Five traits as well as specific social media applications and activities including social networking sites, instant messaging, and video chats. Finally, we investigate the link between personality and more purposeful social media use such as the utilization of these social tools to create political content.

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