

Investigating the Link between Social Media Use and Need to Belong

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Abstract. The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation to be accepted into social relationships and be part of social groups. It has been hypothesized that one of the reasons why people use social media is to manage and maintain their social relationships. This study examined emerging adults' frequency of social media use and the relationship between social media use and need to belong using data from the Emerging Adulthood Measured at Multiple Institutions 2 (EAMMI2) collaboration. As expected, need to belong was positive associated with social media use.

Keywords: Social Media; Need to Belong.

1. Introduction

Feeling belong is important for all human beings (Chin,2006). The sense of belonging is an internal connection between the individual and the group. It is a subjective feeling when we are accepted and recognized by the group. And everyone is lonely, and needs acceptance and recognition in the community to cure loneliness. When we do not have acceptance and recognition in the community, that is, we do not have a sense of belonging, there is no way to eliminate our loneliness, we will feel pain and unhappiness.

As a result, people usually seek out social interactions from various channels when they feel need to belong (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004) and one of the channels through which people seek social interactions and connections is social media (Gruss, Kim, & Abrahams, 2019). Social media is a tool and platform for people to share opinions, insights, experiences and opinions with each other. At present, it mainly includes social networking sites, Weibo, WeChat, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter and so on. Social media flourishes on the fertile soil of the Internet and explodes with dazzling energy. The information it spreads has become an important content for people to browse the Internet. In our lives, social media provides us with a virtual sense of belonging. People can share their lives on social media, and they can also observe others' lives, knowledge and opinions, and gain recognition and companionship from all over the world. These lonely people have found their own electronic tribes on the Internet.

Frequent social media use is linked with loneliness, negative mood, anxiety, depression, lower wellbeing, and decreased life satisfaction (Horwood & Anglim, 2019; Lin et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2020). The association between social media use and poor well-being persists across several reasons for use. Those who reported using social media to compensate for boredom or to improve their image both endorsed low affective well-being associated with use (Hall et al., 2019; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Perhaps this was due to frequent use creating opportunities for social comparison, which is negatively associate.

We hypothesize that people who have higher need to belong are going to use social media more heavily. We tested this hypothesis in testing some questions about people's sense of belonging, we can draw a histogram, calculate the mean, range, median and standard deviation, and draw a conclusion that people who have higher need to belong are going to use social media more heavily. This will make people have an accurate judgment about the use of social media and need to belong.

2. Methods

Participants and Procedure

This study uses the Emerging Adulthood Measured Across Multiple Institutions 2 (EAMMI2) dataset (Grahe et al., 2018). The EAMMI2 is a multicampus collaboration including 32 institutions. The current study included 2338 participants between 18 and 44, and on average, participants were 21 years old (range:18-44 years old, $SD = 3.62$), most of them were female (71.9%). Project organizers recruited contributors through social media (Facebook & Twitter) and listserv invitations (Society of Personality and Social Psychology, Society of Teaching Psychology). Recruitment was open, but all collaborators were from English speaking institutions. They followed protocols to demonstrate Institutional Review Board approval following the original approval of Primary Investigator from Pacific Lutheran University – IRB# HPRB SP16-13. These approvals were publicly recorded, then contributors received a link to the Qualtrics survey with a site-specific identifier.

Respondents received a link to the EAMMI2 survey either via email invitation or through campus specific recruiting procedures (such as SONA systems). When they completed the EAMMI2 survey online, they were instructed to do so in private and received informed consent and debriefing via the survey itself. When completed in a laboratory, they were provided privacy and could receive further debriefing from the researcher. Local data collection procedures are reported on the EAMMI2 Development and Recruitment Plan document on the Samples and Procedures Component (Grahe et al., 2018).

Measures

The current study focuses on the following measures.

Social media use. Social media use was measured through the questions that evaluated their social media use frequency with different use purposes. Specifically, participants were asked to “think of the social media platform you use most often. How often do you use it for the following reasons?”. Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (never) to 5 (a lot) to indicate their agreement with ten statements about their social media use (e.g., check out someone I might want to know better).

Need to belong. Participants completed the Need to Belong Scale to assess their need to belong (Leary et al., 2013). Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to indicate their agreement with ten statements about their need to belong (e.g., my feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me.).

Hypothesis and analyses

We hypothesize that people who have higher need to belong are going to use social media more heavily. We used ordinary linear regression to investigate the relation between belonging and social media use after controlling for demographic variables such as age and sex.

3. Results

On average, our participants reported moderate level of social media 3.14 and standard deviation=0.79. Our participants responded neutrally level of need to belong mean=3.31 and standard deviation=0.55. We found a negative association to age and social media use ($r=-0.19$, $p<0.001$). We found a negative association to age and need to belong use ($r=-0.15$, $p<0.001$). this mean that when people get older, they use less social media and feel less need to belong. On average, reported that girls use social media more often ($t=-5.07$, $p<0.001$). Also, we reported that girls feel more need to belong compared to boys ($t=-5.59$, $p<0.001$).

We hypothesize a positive correlation between social media use and need to belong, and we tested this by using a linear regression modal. After controlling the age and gender, the results of our model show a positive effect of need to belong on social media use ($b=0.37$, $p<0.001$). This result shows that when belonging is higher, people tend to use social media more frequently.

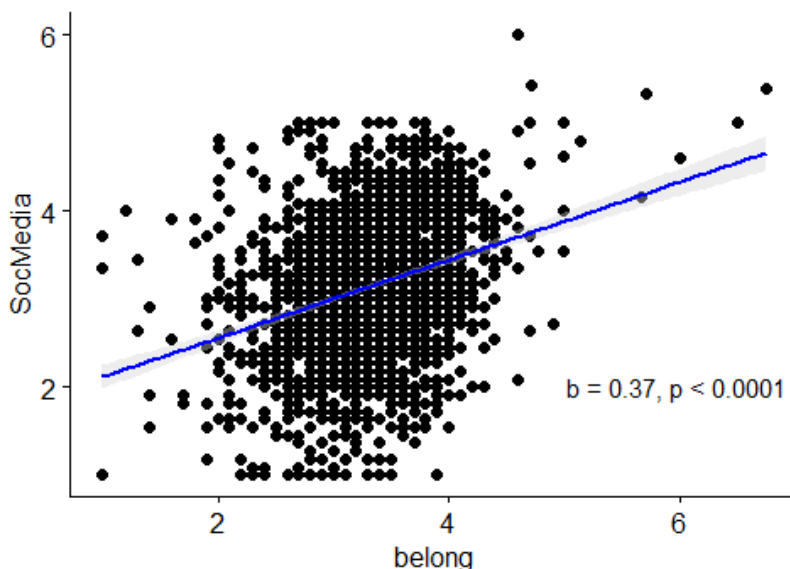


Figure 1. Scatter plot depicting the association between need to belong and social media use

Table 1. Multiple regression model results

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	2.401872	0.152649	15.735	< 2e-16 ***
Need to belong	0.369320	0.029848	12.373	< 2e-16 ***
Age	-0.032930	0.004324	-7.616	3.81e-14 ***
Gender	0.110273	0.033954	3.248	0.00118 **

4. Discussion

As we predicted, people who have higher need to belong generally spend more time on social media. But at the same time, we found that age is inversely related to social media use and belonging. This means that as people get older, they use social media less frequently. We also found that compared to males, females use social media more frequently. Overall, there is a strong and positive association between the social media use and belonging, which means that people who have higher need to belong are going to use social media more heavily. Since the correlation was positive, we can suggest that there is a significant relationship between two variables.

Because social media gives us lots of platforms for social connection, and need to belong is one of the strongest one that drives social media use (Reich & Vorderer, 2013). Connection-promoting use of social network sites may benefit users by helping them meet needs for acceptance and belonging. A wealth of research has found that high-quality intimate relationships are critical to well-being, affecting happiness, health, and even longevity (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

But there are still some limitations in the investigation. The study used a self-assessment online questionnaire and participants were given brief explanation for their choices and took very little time to complete the survey. In addition, responses were based on first impressions and may not accurately reflect their behaviors. Future studies could use mobile phone applications to objectively measure their social media use on different apps.

As individuals, when we don't feel wanted, we may seek it out on social media in moderation. But don't get caught up in social media, because you might think you're talking to a young, handsome man who's really just a middle-aged, balding man in disguise.

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