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Self-Completion Processes Underlying Social Media Use

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Abstract

Why do people use social media? Drawing on the theory of symbolic self-completion (SCT; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), the present work hypothesizes that people use social media to engage in self-symbolizing posting and reach self-completion, that is for sharing pertinent symbols of completeness and restore incomplete identity goals such as ‘becoming a physician’ or ‘being a good mother’. Further, since new social networking sites have *ideal features* for self-symbolizing, people may be attracted to using them right because of these ideal features (e.g., the possibility to address an audience at any time). The first set of experiments tested whether medical and law students who sense incompleteness concerning their professional identity goals engage in compensatory self-symbolizing on Instagram by increasing their posting of respective indicators of goal attainment (e.g., medical white coats vs. court clothes). Study 1 found that incomplete medical students post more medicine-related symbols on Instagram. Study 2 replicated this effect in a sample of law students and clarified that students’ self-symbolizing posts specifically relate to their incomplete goal (i.e., law career) and not to other non-pertinent domains (i.e., university life). Study 3 demonstrated that incomplete medical students only engage in self-symbolizing when their incompleteness refers to their career goal and not to other careers they do not aspire to (i.e., a law career).

Driven by the theory, a fourth experiment extended these findings by testing two related hypotheses: (a) identity goal incompleteness—as a goal-oriented state—should induce orienting effects, such as impulsiveness when posting online, disinterest in others’ posted contents, irritation, and narrowing of attention; (b) all these orienting

effects should be defused through the publishing of a self-symbolizing post on Instagram (i.e., a post entailing symbols of goal attainment). Study 4 supported both the hypotheses, demonstrating that identity goal incompleteness causes specific orienting effects intended to facilitate goal achievement and that posting self-symbolizing content on social media can resolve incompleteness and make these orienting effects disappear.

An additional set of studies took the testing of our self-completion explanation a step further by strictly verifying whether people are attracted to social sites because of their ideal features for self-symbolizing. Based on SCT, we identified eight of these ideal features (e.g., the possibility to treat others as a mere audience) and created various manipulated conditions in which social media had or did not have these ideal characteristics, expecting that the absence of them would have reduced social media's appeal and their efficiency in satisfying self-completion needs. Across two experiments, we found partial support for both these hypotheses. Study 5 and Study 6 indeed found that social media with ideal features for self-symbolizing were more appealing than other sites, as well as more efficient in satisfying self-completion needs. Theoretical and practical implications of the present research for a better understanding of social media behaviors, preventing negative consequences of self-symbolizing on social media, and deepening the study of self-completion processes are discussed.

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