

The Complex Relationship Between Social Media and Human Belonging

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Abstract: Social media now occupies a central role in contemporary society, shaping communication patterns and influencing essential psychological needs such as the sense of belonging. This paper examines the intricate relationship between social media and belonging, addressing its capacity to foster interpersonal connections while exposing its inherent shortcomings. The study analyzes the psychological underpinnings of belonging, how cultural circumstances influence social media experiences, and the divergent impacts of active versus passive engagement by examining important research. Additionally, the article turns its lens to how social media can influence users' political and social participation through low-cost social interactions. According to the research, social media helps people connect, but it frequently falls short of offering the depth and genuineness required for significant assistance. Moreover, the negative consequences of superficial interactions and social comparisons emerge as significant challenges. To address these limitations, the study proposes design improvements to enhance the quality of interactions and advocates for culturally sensitive strategies that meet the needs of diverse global audiences.

Keywords: Social Media, Belonging, Cross-Cultural perspectives, psychological, Political Participation

1. Introduction

In modern society, social media has become an integral part of people's daily lives. From Facebook to Instagram, social media has not only reshaped the way people communicate but also influenced how individuals perceive belonging and social acceptance [1]. Belonging is a widely studied topic in social psychology and educational psychology and is considered a basic motivation that affects individual psychological and social functioning [2]. This paper aims to explore whether social media can meet the basic social needs of human beings: belonging.

Research shows that while social media provides users with a new platform for communication and connection, the quality of these connections and their actual contribution to deep social support is questionable [3]. Additionally, social media use may cause users to feel lonely and anxious, especially when their interaction patterns become passive [1]. Therefore, this paper will evaluate the effectiveness of social media in meeting basic human social needs by analyzing its potential and limitations in providing a sense of social belonging.

Furthermore, this paper will also consider how social media influences users' political and social engagement through low-cost social interactions [3], and will explore how a sense of belonging can be effectively fostered in varying social and educational contexts. Of particular interest is the impact

of diverse cultural backgrounds on the use and perception of belonging on social media platforms. Social media is widely used globally, yet its impact on users from different cultural backgrounds may exhibit significant differences. For instance, users from individualistic and collectivistic cultures may exhibit distinct social media usage patterns and expectations, which are crucial in shaping how relationships are formed and maintained through these platforms. By delving into these cultural differences, this study aims to reveal how cultural factors shape the capability of social media to satisfy the need for belonging and how social media platforms can be optimized through culturally adaptive strategies to more effectively serve a globally diverse user base.

2. Literature review

2.1. Psychological Basis of Belonging

In the fields of social psychology and educational psychology, belonging is considered one of the basic human motivations, profoundly affecting the social and psychological functions of individuals [2]. Belonging involves an individual's sense of identity with their social environment and a feeling of being accepted by society, which has been shown in many studies to be associated with various positive psychological and behavioural outcomes [4].

The impact of belonging is not limited to the individual level; its social function is also significant. Hagerty and others showed that individuals with a strong sense of belonging tend to have better social support networks, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of social participation [4]. These findings indicate that belonging is not only related to individuals' mental health but also affects their social interactions and community participation.

Research on belonging in educational psychology also highlights its importance. A sense of belonging in a school environment is closely related to students' academic performance, mental health, and social behaviour [5]. A sense of belonging can promote students' active participation and reduce dropout rates and early school leaving, which is an important intervention point for educators and policymakers.

Although the positive impact of belonging is widely recognized, its construction and maintenance are not without challenges. The lack of a sense of belonging may cause individuals to experience social exclusion or isolation, which has a potential negative impact on mental health [4]. Therefore, how to effectively promote the formation of a sense of belonging in various social and educational environments has become a key issue in current research and practice.

2.2. The Impact of Social Media

In exploring how social media affects users' sense of belonging, Clark et al. [1] pointed out that social networks such as Facebook and Instagram help meet people's need for belonging by promoting interaction and connection between users. However, the use of social media may also bring side effects of loneliness and social comparison, which may negatively impact users' well-being [1]. Twenge's research further indicated that although social media increases the number of interpersonal connections, these connections are often superficial and insufficient to provide deep social support [3].

From the perspective of motivation for use, active interactions on social media, such as sharing, commenting, and sending messages, can enhance people's social capital and perceived sense of community belonging, potentially increasing individual happiness [1]. However, passive use of social media, such as browsing other people's information without interacting, may lead to social comparison, increasing loneliness and depression [1].

Additionally, the use of social media reflects some underlying social psychological dynamics. For example, low-cost social behaviours conducted through social media, such as online petitions, can

increase users' online political participation but do not necessarily translate into political or social actions in the real world [3]. This suggests that social media may play a role in raising social awareness and information dissemination but has limited effects in promoting in-depth social participation and actual action.

2.3. The Impact of Social Media from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

In the context of globalization, the usage of social media and its impact on users' sense of belonging exhibit significant differences across cultures. According to Clark et al. [1], in Western countries, social media often serves as a platform for self-expression and sharing personal life, which enhances users' freedom of expression and social interaction. However, it may also exacerbate comparisons and anxiety among users. For instance, frequent social updates and unlimited access to others' lives can lead to what is referred to as the 'comparison trap', where users may feel inadequate by comparing their lives to the highlights of others.

In contrast, Twenge [3] notes that in Asian countries, where collectivist cultures are more prominent, the role of social media is often closely linked with maintaining existing social connections, especially among family and friends. In these cultures, social media is more commonly viewed as a tool for sustaining relationships, rather than merely a platform for display and comparison. Interactions on these platforms tend to enhance group cohesion and support networks.

Moreover, research also indicates that the impact of social media on feelings of belonging varies with geographical location and socio-economic factors. For example, Allen et al. [5] mention in their study that in regions with fewer resources, social media may become a vital bridge to the outside world, thereby enhancing users' sense of social belonging and community involvement to some extent.

Thus, it is evident that cultural backgrounds not only influence the patterns of social media usage but also profoundly affect how social media shapes and satisfies the needs for belonging. Understanding these differences is crucial for designing more inclusive and culturally sensitive social media strategies. Future research needs to further explore how individuals in different cultural contexts construct and experience belonging through social media, and how these experiences affect their mental health and social behavior.

3. Limitations of Social Media on Human Belonging

Regarding the construction of social capital, Ellison et al. [6] showed that the use of social media, especially Facebook, is associated with enhanced social capital, particularly in terms of weak ties. This phenomenon reveals the potential of social media in expanding users' social networks, although these ties may lack depth. However, research must also consider whether these superficial social connections can be transformed into actual social support.

Further, Clark et al. [1] provided a link between social media use and personal well-being. The study pointed out that when users actively participate in social media, such as by posting and interacting, their sense of well-being is significantly improved because this way of interaction strengthens interpersonal connections and support. In contrast, passive use of social media, such as browsing without interaction, may not bring the same positive effects and may increase users' loneliness and depression.

There are certain complexities when exploring the relationship between social media and real-world participation. Research shows that while some users express their views on social issues through social media, this behaviour may prompt them to participate in offline protests. This demonstrates that, in some cases, social media can be used as a tool to promote social participation. However, users who only obtain information through social media may not necessarily be

transformed into actors in the real world, indicating the limitations of social media in promoting deep social action [3].

In addition, research on social media and political participation has shown similar results. Although active users on Facebook may show high political activities on the platform, their political participation in real life is relatively low, reflecting that social media activities may not be deeply transformed into broader social and political actions [3].

Finally, the relationship between social media and mental health problems deserves attention. [1] also pointed out that social media use may enhance egocentric behaviour and is associated with narcissistic behaviour, which may negatively impact individuals' social interactions and mental health.

4. Discussion

Social media has obvious limitations in meeting users' need for belonging. Although social media can provide interaction and connection to a certain extent, such connections are often superficial and lack depth and persistence. For example, Baltatzis et al. [7] pointed out that social media tools can bring certain benefits to internal communication in large organizations but also face risks of privacy, information security, and insufficient user participation. This indicates that although social media promotes the rapid circulation of information, it may also cause information fragmentation, making it difficult to form lasting social support and a deep sense of belonging.

Additionally, the authenticity of virtual social interaction has also been questioned. Botelho [8] discussed the accessibility of digital technology, pointing out that despite rapid technological development, the accessibility of technology has not improved synchronously for people with disabilities, limiting their opportunities to gain a sense of belonging through social media. This situation shows that technological progress does not always mean that social media will become more inclusive and effective, especially for those groups that need special consideration.

For future research directions and improvement measures for social media platforms, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on how social media can better meet users' deep social needs. Research should focus on how to enhance the quality of social media interactions, not just the quantity, by improving algorithms and user interface design. At the same time, strengthening the protection of user privacy and data security is also a key factor in improving social media user experience.

In examining how social media satisfies individuals' need for belonging, the significance of cultural backgrounds in influencing social media usage cannot be overlooked. For instance, according to Clark et al. [1], differing cultural backgrounds may fundamentally alter the degree of reliance on and the manner of using social media. Users from individualistic cultures may be more inclined to utilize social media to showcase personal achievements and enhance self-presentation. In contrast, those from collectivistic cultures might use it primarily to maintain existing community and familial ties.

Moreover, cultural variations also affect the quality of support and belonging users experience through social media. In collectivist societies, social media platforms are often seen as tools to strengthen connections between family and friends, providing more emotional support and a sense of group identity [3]. In contrast, in individualistic societies, social media may serve more as a means for self-expression and the establishment of new social connections, potentially leading to superficial interactions and increased social comparison, which can impact users' psychological health and well-being.

Further analysis suggests that cultural backgrounds not only influence how individuals use social media but also determine the extent of psychological satisfaction derived from it. For example, the need for belonging, as mentioned by Baumeister & Leary [2], may manifest differently across cultures, which is reflected in how individuals seek and maintain social connections through social media.

Users in individualistic cultures might seek broader social networks to enhance social status or self-perception, while those in collectivistic cultures may prioritize deep, meaningful interactions.

Thus, understanding and analyzing these cultural differences are crucial for the design and policy-making of social media platforms. By considering these differences, social media platforms can tailor their functionalities and services better to meet the needs of users from diverse cultures. Such culturally adaptive strategies not only enhance user experience but also promote the effective use and social impact of social media globally.

In examining the impact of social media on human belonging, existing studies generally contend that social media can meet individual social needs to some extent, particularly in connecting broad social networks and providing instant feedback [1]. However, this perspective overlooks a critical issue: whether the connections formed on social media are sufficiently profound to offer genuine and enduring psychological support. Research indicates that interactions on social media are often superficial, and users may feel lonelier due to a lack of in-depth communication [3]. This superficial mode of interaction, compared to real, face-to-face social interactions, often fails to satisfy deeper psychological needs, such as genuine understanding and emotional support.

Furthermore, the design of social media platforms often encourages frequent and superficial exchanges, which not only affects the quality of social interactions but may also lead to user experiences of anxiety and dissatisfaction in social comparisons [1]. For example, a continually updating feed and highlighted "success" stories often cause meaningless comparisons among users, potentially exacerbating feelings of isolation and insecurity.

5. Policy and Practice Recommendations

Given the above analysis, designers and policymakers of social media platforms need to reconsider the social dynamics structure of their products. Firstly, platforms should design features that promote deep communication and the establishment of lasting relationships, such as long-term interaction projects between users, and creating groups or communities based on common interests and goals. This would help users establish more meaningful connections on social media, rather than merely increasing the number of connections.

Secondly, platforms need to implement measures to reduce users' social comparison behaviors. This could be achieved by adjusting algorithms to decrease recommendations of high-frequency updates or superficially attractive content, instead promoting more genuine, constructive communication content. Additionally, policymakers should consider introducing stricter privacy and data protection laws to prevent misuse of user data and increase users' trust and satisfaction with the social media environment.

Lastly, educators and mental health professionals should collaborate to develop guidance and educational programs tailored for users of different ages and backgrounds, educating them on how to use social media healthily, and identifying and addressing psychological issues arising from social media use.

Through these critical analyses and specific recommendations, a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social media in modern social structures can be achieved, and strategies can be provided to improve its impact on users' psychological and social health. This not only enhances individual user satisfaction but also supports the sustainable development of social media.

6. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive examination of the dual role that social media plays in addressing the human need for belonging. While platforms like Facebook and Instagram can facilitate interactions and connections, the relationships they foster often lack depth and fail to provide

enduring psychological support. Furthermore, passive engagement with social media, characterized by mere browsing and observation, frequently results in negative consequences such as social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, and heightened loneliness. To cultivate healthier social environments online, users should prioritize active participation, such as initiating meaningful conversations and contributing to community dialogues. Additionally, educators and platform developers must reimagine social media designs that encourage deeper, more authentic connections. Special consideration should be given to accessibility challenges faced by marginalized groups, ensuring equitable opportunities for all users to derive benefits from these platforms. Ultimately, while social media holds promise as a tool for fostering belonging, its limitations underline the need for innovative designs and policies that go beyond surface-level interactions. Future advancements should aim to create a more inclusive, supportive, and psychologically fulfilling digital landscape for diverse user communities.

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