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The Journey to Self: An Intra-personal Perspective of Emotion Regulation on Social Networking Sites

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

Although social networking sites (SNS) users often share positive emotions in the content posted online, their satisfaction with SNS and intention to continue using it vary greatly across users. We argue that a key to addressing this puzzle is how content creators up-regulate their emotions on SNS. Building on emotion regulation theory and belongingness theory, we characterize digital emotion regulation in two ways (i.e., positive shift and emotional labor) and propose a dual-pathway model that involves two self-views. By constructing three complementary studies, we find that it is emotional labor, rather than positive shift, that drives a user's sense of belonging through anticipated self-enhancement (i.e., communal self-view) and felt authenticity (i.e., authentic self-view) and explains the varying outcomes. Our findings reveal the benefits of deep acting and countervailing effects of surface acting. The present research provides important theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Digital emotion regulation, emotional labor, sense of belonging, authenticity, satisfaction, continuance intention

Introduction

Given the social functions of social networking sites (SNS), SNS afford users opportunities to share their emotions with others and also to consume emotion-enriched content shared by others. The shared emotions about users' personal life are largely positive (Bazarova et al. 2013; Kramer and Chung 2011). An important reason for the prevalence of positive emotions flooded on SNS is that people often regulate (manage) their emotions. They tend to shift their emotion expressions in a positive direction and engage in "digital" emotion regulation (i.e., emotion regulation in a digital environment). The outcomes of SNS satisfaction and continuance intention are critical not only to SNS users who strive to have a desirable experience on SNS, but also to SNS platforms that strive to engage and retain users.

However, these outcomes have been revealed to vary a great deal across individuals (Vogel and Rose 2016). This issue calls for an examination of the intra-personal effects of SNS users' positive regulation of their emotions while creating content. SNS may afford these SNS users opportunities to fulfill their

psychological needs such as self-views (Karahanna et al. 2018), but the users may not necessarily reap these psychological benefits depending on what they do on SNS (Volkoff and Strong 2017; Zammuto et al. 2007). In the current research, we examine the following question: *How does digital emotion regulation influence SNS users' satisfaction and continuance intention, and why?*

To address this question, we first distinguish three aspects of (digital) emotion regulation based on the metaphor of a journey (Scott et al. 2020a). Essential to depicting a journey are the distance and direction from its origin to its destination. By engaging in digital emotion regulation, SNS users “travel” from their true feelings to a more positive expression, which is termed positive shift that taps into both the distance and direction (fixed to be positive) of SNS users' emotional travel (see Bledow et al. 2011). In addition to the distance and direction, another distinctive feature of a journey is travel methods. In emotion regulation, travel methods are typically referred to as emotional labor strategies and are indispensable to understanding the consequences of emotion regulation (Scott et al. 2020a). Specifically, emotional labor pertains to how an individual travels from the emotional origin (the inner feeling) to the emotional destination (the publicly observable display). In other words, emotional labor is about *how* an individual regulates emotions. Two typical and representative emotional labor strategies are surface acting and deep acting; surface acting involves the modification of public displays without changing the underlying feelings, whereas deep acting involves the modification of inner feelings to match emotional expressions (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). These emotional labor strategies are particularly common on SNS because asynchrony enables users to engage in surface acting and deep acting without time pressure (Berger 2014; Berger and Iyengar 2013). Thus, a joint consideration of both positive shift (emotional travel's direction and distance) and emotional labor strategies (travel methods) is critical to understanding the intra-personal effects of SNS users' digital emotion regulation.

While both positive shift and emotional labor strategies are important in offline settings such as customer services (Scott et al. 2020a), their effects may not be the same in digital settings. As an example, surface acting in both offline and digital settings can create a dissonance between felt emotions and expressed emotions, thus precluding one from feeling authentic or true to who s/he is (Hülshager and Schewe 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al. 2013). However, while offline emotion regulation typically focuses on satisfying a target's needs (e.g., customers as targets of service providers) (Chi et al. 2011), digital emotion regulation is deployed largely for self-serving purposes. Exemplar purposes include self-enhancement, positive self-presentation, and attainment of desirable self-views for belongingness purposes (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012). In positively presenting themselves, users may choose either surface acting or deep acting. Compared to surface acting, deep acting has a stronger potential for enabling SNS users to attain both authenticity and sense of belonging; nonetheless, deep acting requires more efforts on the part of users.

Drawing upon Scott et al. (2020a)'s emotion regulation theory and Baumeister and Leary (1995)'s belongingness theory, we advance a unique dual-pathway model explaining the intra-personal effects of digital emotion regulation. Scott et al.'s emotion regulation theory emphasizes the intra-personal effects of *offline* positive shift and emotional labor strategies on felt authenticity. However, it overlooks actors' sense of belonging presumably because offline emotion regulation tends to involve dyadic interactions. The dominant focus in dyadic offline emotion regulation is on the satisfaction and experience of targets (Bazarova et al. 2015). In capturing this unique characteristic of SNS, we integrate Scott et al.'s theory with belongingness theory (Baumeister and Leary 1995) to theorize how digital emotion regulation of SNS users may influence their felt authenticity and sense of belonging, which can in turn shape their SNS satisfaction and continuance intention.

We conducted two experiments and one survey study. We found that deep acting enabled users to attain both felt authenticity and sense of belonging (ensuing from anticipated self-enhancement), both of which enhance their SNS satisfaction and continuance intention. In contrast, surface acting had countervailing effects on users' felt authenticity and sense of belonging. Surprisingly, positive shift had no meaningful effects. Our multi-study research makes notable contributions to the emerging literature on digital emotion regulation on SNS by expanding the study of emotions in the SNS environment to its intrapersonal effects. Our research also reveals the importance of emotional labor strategies (rather than positive shift) in explaining user's satisfaction and continuance intention, and demonstrates an omitted upside of emotional labor strategies in the SNS environment. Our research further provides important practical insights for SNS platforms and content contributors.

Theoretical Development and Hypotheses

In the current research, the outcome variables of interest are SNS satisfaction and continuance intention. Satisfaction is an affective attitude based on a cognitive appraisal (Bhattacharjee 2001; Oliver 1993). We define SNS satisfaction as a feeling of fulfillment after users' activities on SNS (Bae 2018). SNS continuance intention, as a behavioral intention construct, is defined as one's plan to use SNS in the future (Thatcher et al. 2018). Since both SNS satisfaction and continuance intention are key to retaining SNS users and predictive of SNS companies' sustainable performance, they are critical for the success of SNS platforms (Bae 2018; Bhattacharjee and Barfar 2011; Wixom and Todd 2005). In the following, we theorize how and why different aspects of SNS users' emotion regulation can influence these outcome variables.

Emotion Regulation: Positive Shift and Emotional Labor

SNS are designed as a platform for users to actively create and share information (Treem and Leonardi 2013). As such, SNS afford users a platform to satisfy their need to establish and maintain desirable social connections (Cheung et al. 2011; Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012). In doing so, SNS users tend to self-regulate, such as actively regulating their emotional expressions posted online, to maintain their positive self-views. Next, we build on the rich literature of emotion regulation and its diverse characterizations, consider the unique aspects of the SNS environment, and develop a research model about the intrapersonal effects of digital emotion regulation on SNS users' experiences and outcomes.

People regulate their emotions and modify the emotional display to express a desired emotion. Emotion regulation is defined as the processes through which people modify their emotional expression in a given situation (Gross 1999; Gross 2008). An essential element of emotion regulation is its direction that includes up- and down-regulation. Up-regulation refers to a more positive display of emotions compared to the originally felt emotions, whereas down-regulation refers to a more negative display (Coté 2005; Hochschild 2012). In our context, SNS users largely shift to a more positive public display of their emotions (Bazarova et al. 2013). Thus, we focus only on the up-regulation of emotions in the current research.

Emotion regulation can be characterized in different ways, one of which is what we call positive shift. If we consider emotion regulation as a journey that travels from the inner feelings to the public display, then positive shift represents the distance of this journey in a positive direction. In addition to the direction of emotional travel, its distance (i.e., the gap between the origin and the destination) is another defining aspect of an emotional journey (Scott et al. 2020a). Emotional distance matters since the required efforts and the ensuing consequences can be different even though digital emotion regulation is in a positive direction. For instance, it requires more effort for a climber to reach the summit of a mountain than to stop at the halfway. Drawing on the concept of affective shift (valence-based shift such as from a neutral feeling to a positive feeling) (see Bledow et al. 2011), we define positive (affective) shift as the emotional voyage from a negative, neutral, or positive inner feeling to a more positive public display.

As is noted earlier, describing an emotional journey requires a joint consideration of the travel distance/direction as reflected by positive shift and travel methods, because the travel method can also influence the outcomes of an emotional journey. For instance, taking a skyride is a much lighter trip than walking up to the summit. Emotional travel methods are reflected by emotional labor strategies, defined as the way of managing feelings to create a publicly observable display (Hochschild 1979). The two main strategies are surface acting and deep acting: the former is defined as the display of certain emotions without changing one's inner feelings, and the latter is defined as modifying one's inner feeling to match the emotional expressions one attempts to display (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995; Diefendorff et al. 2005; Grandey 2003). Prior literature largely focuses on the role of emotional labor in workplaces, whereby individuals are usually required to regulate emotions to better serve others such as customers (Chi et al. 2011; Coté 2005; Grandey 2003). Digital emotion regulation is different in that it is largely self-serving.

Digital Emotion Regulation and Self-views

Digital emotion regulation is related to two aspects of self-views: authentic and communal self-views. SNS help fulfill users' need for self-expressions and afford them opportunities of self-presentation and

impression management. Both of them are tied to an individual's self-views (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010; Karahanna et al. 2018; Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012), referring to how one identifies oneself and is thus central to human experiences (Walker 2021). The two fundamental aspects of self-views are authentic and communal self-views (Brown 1997; Hitlin 2003; Tajfel et al. 1979; Turner et al. 1987).

Enabled by SNS as a venue for emotion regulation, SNS users are very likely to reflect on their self-views when they regulate their emotions before sharing their experiences. On one hand, digital emotion regulation may (or may not) enable individuals to attain authenticity (authentic self-view). An authentic self-view is based on one's identification in relation to the self as a unique entity possessing unique characteristics, experiences, values and beliefs (Gino et al. 2020; Hewlin et al. 2020; Li et al. 2021). It is associated with an inward focus on one's true self (Hitlin 2003). Digital emotion regulation allows SNS users to present their feelings and experiences in a way that departs from their true self, thus influencing felt authenticity (Barrett-Lennard 1998; Kraus et al. 2011; Lenton et al. 2013).

On the other hand, digital emotion regulation enables individuals to fulfill their communal self-view or sense of belonging. A communal self-view is based on one's self-categorization in relation to a social group (e.g., a SNS community). An individual categorizes oneself as a member of a social group by showing attractiveness and value to the group. As they anticipate or find that their value is recognized by the group, they form a communal self-view, which has an outward focus on one's social group membership (Chu et al. 2019; Stryker and Burke 2000). On SNS, users are concerned about their social image and crave to be accepted by others (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012). SNS are also designed to facilitate users' pursuit of a desired social image, such as the features of "like" and "follow"; thus, users tend to keep polishing the post before sharing to garner more "likes" (Blumberg et al. 2016). Through digital emotion regulation, individuals express socially acceptable and desirable emotions (typically positive emotions) about their personal life to appeal to other community members, which enhances their sense of belonging—a feeling of affiliation with others in a social community (Lin et al. 2014; Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012). Therefore, digital emotion regulation can also influence users' communal self-view, associated with their sense of belonging to the SNS community. Both authentic and communal self-views are related to SNS satisfaction and continuance intention, which we will elaborate further in the following.

Felt Authenticity Ensuing from Digital Emotion Regulation

To theorize the effect of digital emotion regulation on one's authentic self-view, we draw on Scott et al. (2020a)'s emotion regulation theory. As noted earlier, this theory highlights a joint consideration of emotional travel distance, direction, and methods. It proposes that all three aspects of an emotional journey can influence felt authenticity, defined as a self-reflective experience of feeling true to oneself (Vannini and Franzese 2008).

First, we propose that positive shift is negatively associated with felt authenticity. SNS users often conceal their inner feelings by shifting their expressions of those feelings to be more positive (i.e., positive shift) (Uysal and Lu 2011). As people do so, they reduce the consistency between their emotion display and their true self. Such private-public discrepancy (i.e., positive shift) impairs people's validation of who they are, creates inconformity with one's self-definition, and thus leads to the experience of reduced felt authenticity (Crabtree and Pillow 2020; Newheiser and Barreto 2014; Wood et al. 2008). Scott et al. (2020a) similarly argued that an increase of emotional distance in any specific direction leads to a reduction in felt authenticity. Accordingly, we propose H1a below.

H1a: Users' positive shift on SNS is negatively associated with their felt authenticity.

Second, we propose that surface acting, which involves the display of positive emotions without changing one's inner feelings, is also negatively associated with felt authenticity. Surface acting involves the modification of public display without changing inner feelings. Thus, it creates a gap between inner feelings and emotional expressions, leading to the dissonance between one's genuine experiences and public expressions. Prior literature studying surface acting in offline settings has consistently revealed a detrimental effect on various outcomes, including felt authenticity (Grandey and Gabriel 2015; Hülsheger and Schewe 2011; Scott et al. 2020a). We argue that a similar effect should apply to SNS users engaged in surface acting; they display positive emotions while maintaining their less positive true feelings. Thus, such a discrepancy between their true feelings and public displays should reduce their felt authenticity.

H2a: Users' surface acting on SNS is negatively associated with their felt authenticity.

Third, we argue that greater engagement in deep acting, which requires users to adapt their inner feelings to match their positive displays, should be positively associated with their felt authenticity. As the dissonance between inner feelings and public displays is eliminated or at least reduced in deep acting, users will likely experience enhanced felt authenticity. Consistent with Scott et al. (2020a), we propose that deep acting enables individuals to feel authentic. SNS users who engage in deep acting to show a positive emotion are attentive to both inner feelings and public displays to keep them consistent with one another. Thus, they tend to feel consistent with who they are, or authentic (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Accordingly, we propose H3a below.

H3a: Users' deep acting on SNS is positively associated with their felt authenticity.

We further propose that users' felt authenticity is positively associated with their SNS satisfaction. People have a natural tendency to "be themselves" and maintain a feeling of authenticity (Thomaes et al. 2017). Felt authenticity would confirm their self-view, satisfying people's universal need to be true to themselves and resulting in positive affect (Heppner et al. 2008). Moreover, social norms on SNS encourage users to be authentic to others (Lim et al. 2015; Marwick and Boyd 2011). SNS users who develop a feeling of authenticity should be more at ease with such social norms, view SNS as an ideal venue for realizing their goal of expressing an authentic self, and thus be more satisfied with SNS. We propose H4 accordingly.

H4: Users' felt authenticity is positively associated with their SNS satisfaction.

Sense of Belonging Ensuing from Digital Emotion Regulation

We argue that emotion regulation on SNS also boosts users' sense of belonging through anticipated self-enhancement. We draw on Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness theory to explain the implication of users' digital emotion regulation for their communal self-view. Sense of belonging is defined as the experience of involvement in a group or community that causes the individual to feel like an integral part of that group or community (Hagerty et al. 1992). SNS users form a virtual community, where people naturally seek acceptance and belongingness. Prior literature on emotion expressions is largely limited to dyadic contexts (Rimé 2009), whereas SNS users communicate with a community of people. They strive to be accepted as a valued member of the community while engaging in digital emotion regulation.

We argue that users' positive shift, surface acting, and deep acting are all positively associated with their anticipated self-enhancement, defined as their anticipation of increasing the positivity of their self-view (Leary 2007) that can precede sense of belonging. People regulate their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors to approach an anticipated outcome. There is an if-then contingency programmed in people's minds during the process of self-regulation (Baumeister et al. 2007). For instance, consumers choose the brands that manifest their competence because they believe if they choose these brands, then others would appraise them in a favorable way, and they would experience lowered anxiety (Proksch et al. 2015).

Similarly, people would anticipate certain appraisals from their audience as they engage in emotion regulation on SNS. Users engage in digital emotion regulation through positive shift, surface acting, or deep acting, all of which would lead them to the destination of more positive emotional expressions. SNS users tend to believe that if they regulate emotions in a more positive direction, then they would project favorable impressions to others and improve their relational value. This is especially true for digital emotion regulation because it is asynchronous. SNS create an asynchronous communication environment, allowing users to keep polishing their wording before posting and to expect certain feedbacks from the audience before receiving any (Berger and Iyengar 2013). This allows SNS users to form a relational self-concept based on expected reactions rather than actual reactions of the audience that usually come later. Thus, users who engage in digital emotion regulation would anticipate an enhanced self-image and increased positivity of one's self-concept in others' eyes (i.e., anticipated self-enhancement). We propose H1b, H2b, and H3b accordingly.

H1b: Users' positive shift on SNS is positively associated with their anticipated self-enhancement.

H2b: Users' surface acting on SNS is positively associated with their anticipated self-enhancement.

H3b: Users' deep acting on SNS is positively associated with their anticipated self-enhancement.

We also expect that anticipated self-enhancement is positively associated with a sense of belonging. Prior literature corroborates that the anticipated outcomes ensuing from self-regulatory behaviors are related to

one's relational attachment through the recognition of the attachment object (Proksch et al. 2015). For instance, when people anticipate improved competence from a brand they choose, they tend to perceive the competence-improvement capability of the brand, and thus they are more bonded to the brand. Similarly, when SNS users anticipate self-enhancement, they tend to perceive that they get their self-concept enhanced, recognize the capability of SNS, and become bonded to SNS. All of these help develop a sense of belonging. Moreover, SNS is made of a large group of people who strive to show an enhanced self-image on SNS (Vermeulen et al. 2018). By evaluating oneself favorably through anticipated self-enhancement, an individual also feels attractive and valuable to the large group of people on SNS. Perceiving that one has value added to SNS and that their self-enhancement is consistent with how other SNS members self-present, an individual would have higher identification with the SNS community. High identification with SNS community would drive one's self-categorization as a member of the community and enhances one's sense of belonging (Chu et al. 2019). We propose H5 accordingly.

H5: Anticipated self-enhancement is positively associated with sense of belonging.

We argue that the sense of belonging is positively associated with SNS satisfaction. Sense of belonging is a basic psychological need (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and it is also an important driver and function afforded by SNS (Krasnova et al. 2010; Sheldon et al. 2011). As users form desirable social connections and a sense of belonging on SNS, they feel they are cared for and respected by others. They tend to view others on SNS as sharing similar beliefs and values and view themselves as an integral part of the SNS community. Accordingly, when users tend to view the SNS as a niche that embodies the social connections they desire and fulfills their need to belong, they should evaluate SNS in a favorable way and enhance their overall contentment with SNS (i.e., SNS satisfaction). The positive relationship between satisfying the need to belong and users' satisfaction has also been confirmed in the prior literature (Au et al. 2008; Wang and Li 2016). Accordingly, we propose H6 below.

H6: Users' sense of belonging is positively associated with their SNS satisfaction.

SNS satisfaction is an important predictor of SNS continuance intention. Satisfied users tend to continue using SNS because they want to continue to exploit the functions afforded by SNS, contribute to the digital community, and sustain the positive affect towards the platform they have adopted. There are also both direct and indirect evidence supporting this relationship (e.g., Bhattacharjee 2001; Davis et al. 1989; Karahanna et al. 1999). Thus, satisfaction should increase users' behavioral intention to continue using SNS. Because this relationship is well-established, we will include this pathway in our empirical tests, but we are not proposing a formal hypothesis. We present our conceptual model in Figure 1,

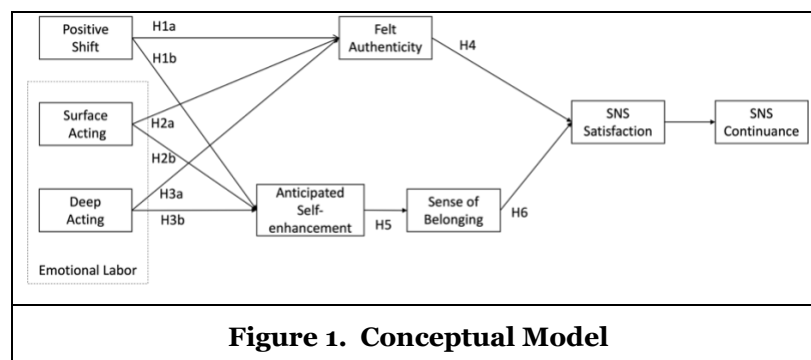


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three complementary studies. The first two studies are experiments. Study 1 manipulated positive shift and focused on how different dimensions of digital emotion regulation influence two self-views in general. Study 2 manipulated surface acting and investigated its countervailing pathways. Study 3 was a survey study, which replicated earlier findings in a realistic setting and investigated alternative explanations.

Study 1

In Study 1, we conducted a between-subjects experiment to test the effect of digital emotion regulation on two self-views, represented by felt authenticity and sense of belonging, and the two outcome variables. We did not test anticipated self-enhancement because we aimed to test the two self-views in general in this

study. Anticipated self-enhancement is used to explain why people would get their sense of belonging fulfilled on SNS. Before diving into the explanation, we tested the overall effect of digital emotion regulation by including sense of belonging and felt authenticity as two parallel mediators. We manipulated positive shift only and measured participants' use of emotional labor strategies. In this study, we manipulated positive shift but not emotional labor for two reasons. First, simply shifting one's emotional expression in a certain direction is much easier and more realistic than performing positive shift using a specific method (i.e., surface acting or deep acting). Second, positive shift is the premise of emotional labor, and any emotional labor strategies would presume the presence of positive shift. Accordingly, it is not feasible to vary both factors independently in an experiment.

Stimulus Materials

To manipulate positive shift, we first asked all participants to recall a "somewhat pleasant event from the recent past that you can remember," and describe "what happened and your feelings about the event." Compared to *imagining* the scenario of feeling pleasant, *recalling* an event with a certain emotion is less artificial and has been used as an effective strategy to manipulate participants' felt emotions (Dalglish et al. 2009; Wegner et al. 1993). Next, we asked participants to compose a post about the event and imagine they would post it on their most used SNS. Participants in the positive shift condition were asked to "appear to be much more positive than your actual feelings about the event." Participants in the no shift condition were asked to "express your actual feelings about the event."

Procedure and Measures

We recruited 120 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (71 female). They received financial compensation for their participation. As a cover story, we told the participants that we were interested in their use of social networking sites. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: positive shift versus no shift.

We first asked the participants to report their most frequently used SNS, report their total number of friends on SNS, and write down the names of three friends on SNS. The purpose of this procedure was to get the participants involved and create a more realistic and personalized setting for the ensuing experiment (Luo et al. 2020). Then participants were asked to think of a somewhat positive event in the past and describe it. Afterwards, they composed a post for the event while expressing either more positive or actual feelings in the post, depending on their assigned condition. After composing the post, participants saw that their post received 301 views after two days. This step was to enhance the realism of our experiment.

Afterwards, we measured relevant constructs using 7-point scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Specifically, participants reported their SNS continuance intention using three items adapted from Bhattacharjee (2001) (e.g., "I will keep using [*their choice of SNS*] as regularly as I do now"). They reported their SNS satisfaction using four items adapted from Bae (2018) (e.g., "I feel good after writing a post on [*their choice of SNS*]"). To measure sense of belonging, participants answered three items adapted from Mayer and Frantz (2004) (e.g., "I think of [*their choice of SNS*] as a community to which I belong"). To measure self-authenticity, we used five items adapted from Fleeson and Wilt (2010) and Wood et al. (2008) (e.g., "I feel I am in accordance with my true self"). Participants also self-reported the extent to which they used surface acting (four items, e.g., "I tried to feel the positive emotions I wanted to show in my post") and deep acting (four items, e.g., "I pretended the emotions I need to show for my post") while writing the post (Blau et al. 2010).

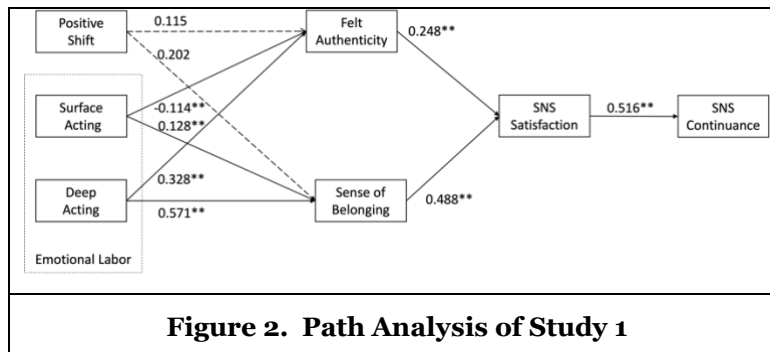
Finally, we used a 9-point Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) valence scale adapted from Bradley and Lang (1994) as a manipulation check for positive shift. After we showed them their description of the event, participants were instructed to select a picture in SAM that best depicted their "actual feelings about the event" (i.e., felt emotion), representing the origin of their emotional journey. On the next screen, after seeing the post they wrote, they were instructed to select a picture that described "the feelings you expressed in your post" (i.e., expressed emotion), representing the destination of their emotional journey. We calculated positive shift using the score difference between felt emotion and expressed emotion for each participant. We asked demographic questions after the manipulation check.

Results

The average age of participants is 41. On average, they have used the social networking sites for 11 years, and the average time they spent on social networking sites is 2.9 hours every day.

We used the difference score of SAM (post emotion score minus event emotion score) to check whether the manipulation of positive shift was successful. Participants assigned to the positive shift group had a higher difference score of SAM compared to those assigned to the no shift group ($M = 0.548$ versus 0.052 , $t(102) = 1.935$, $p = 0.056$). This result indicates that our manipulation of positive shift was successful. We next examined the reliability and validity of our constructs; all values passed the thresholds suggested in prior literature (Nunnally 1978).

Next, we conducted path analysis (using CB-SEM with RStudio v1.4.1103 for all three studies) to test H1a-H3a, H4, and H6. Since controlling for the origin of an emotional journey is necessary to test the net effect of positive shift (Scott et al. 2020a), we added self-reported felt emotion score as a predictor of self-authenticity and anticipated self-enhancement. The model showed reasonable fit ($Chi-sq(8) = 4.828$, CFI = 1, RMSEA < 0.01, SRMR = 0.024). Positive shift was not associated with felt authenticity ($b = 0.115$, $SE = 0.157$, $p = 0.463$) and sense of belonging ($b = 0.202$, $SE = 0.189$, $p = 0.286$). Surface acting was negatively associated with felt authenticity ($b = -0.114$, $SE = 0.042$, $p = 0.007$) but was positively associated with sense of belonging ($b = 0.128$, $SE = 0.051$, $p = 0.012$). Deep acting was positively associated with both felt authenticity ($b = 0.328$, $SE = 0.082$, $p < 0.01$) and sense of belonging ($b = 0.571$, $SE = 0.098$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, H2a and H3a were supported, but H1a was not supported. Both felt authenticity ($b = 0.248$, $SE = 0.077$, $p < 0.01$) and sense of belonging ($b = 0.488$, $SE = 0.062$, $p < 0.01$) were positively associated with SNS satisfaction. Thus, H4 and H6 were supported. SNS satisfaction was positively associated with SNS continuance intention ($b = 0.516$, $SE = 0.090$, $p < 0.01$), as expected. The diagram of the path analysis is shown in Figure 2.



Notes: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$. Although not shown in the diagram, we (1) added felt emotion as a control variable, and (2) controlled for direct effect paths from felt authenticity and sense of belonging to continuance intention.

Discussion

In the first study, we found initial support for the dual pathway model. First, we found that positive shift that taps into emotional travel's distance and direction is not associated with felt authenticity and sense of belonging. Compared to positive shift, emotional labor that measures emotional travel method is more relevant to self-views and outcomes of SNS use. One of the emotional labor strategies, deep acting, bolsters both felt authenticity and sense of belonging. Surface acting, on the contrary, shows an interesting double-edged sword effect: surface acting increases one's sense of belonging, but it decreases one's felt authenticity.

This study had three limitations. First, we did not measure anticipated self-enhancement. Thus, we could not test hypotheses related to anticipated self-enhancement (e.g., H2b and H5). Second, since we only manipulated positive shift in this study, we cannot conclude causal effect of emotional labor, especially surface acting, which has interesting countervailing pathways. Third, participants were asked to shift from a pleasant feeling to a more positive display, which might have created a ceiling effect. We designed the next study to address these limitations.

Study 2

Study 2 was a single factor between-subject experiment that manipulated the presence of surface acting. We focused on surface acting because it is more interesting compared with deep acting and leads to countervailing pathways.

Stimulus Materials, Procedure, and Measures

The cover story and procedure of this study were similar to Study 1, with a few key changes. Due to the concern of a ceiling effect for positive shift, we asked all participants in this study to recall “a somewhat negative event” instead of a somewhat pleasant one as used in Study 1. Afterwards, participants were randomly assigned to surface acting or natural expression condition. Participants in the surface acting condition were asked to write a post and “appear to be much more positive” than their actual feelings in the post. In addition, they were asked to write the post “without modifying your inner feelings about the event” and “keep them different from the more positive” expressed in the post, following prior research that manipulated surface acting (Grandey et al. 2005; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). For the natural expression condition, we adapted our instruction of the control condition in Study 1 and asked the participants to “express your actual feelings about the event” while writing the post.

We recruited 162 undergraduate students from a southern U.S. university. Participants received extra credits for their participation. They were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (surface acting versus natural expression) to write a post. We used the same items and scales to measure SNS satisfaction, continuance intention, felt authenticity, and sense of belonging. In addition, we asked participants to self-report the extent of anticipated self-enhancement after writing the post (three items, e.g., “I expect my post to give people online a positive impression of me”) (Bareket-Bojmel et al. 2016; Eckler and Bolls 2011). As a manipulation check for surface acting, we used three items adapted from existing scales (e.g., “I pretended the emotions I need to show for my post”) (Blau et al. 2010). Because surface acting would require a positive shift by definition, we also measured participants’ felt emotion and expressed emotion respectively, but this time used a 7-point bipolar scale of three items (e.g., “very bad – very good”) (Berger 2011). To measure natural expression, we used a Likert scale of three items (e.g., “The positive/negative emotion that I expressed in my post was genuine”) (Scott et al. 2020b).

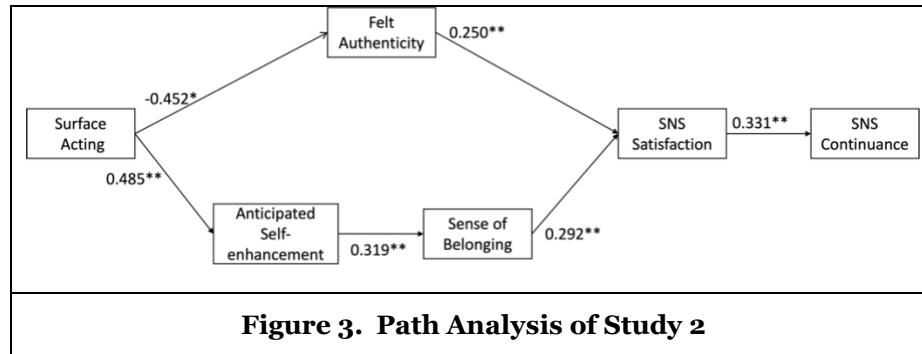
Results

Demographic measures indicate that participants’ average age is 21, and 83% are junior or above. On average, they have used the social networking sites for 8 years, and the average time they spent on social networking sites is 3.8 hours per day. According to our examination of the reliability and validity of all constructs, they all passed the thresholds suggested in prior literature (Nunnally 1978).

We next conducted the manipulation check of surface acting. Using surface acting items, we found that participants assigned to the surface acting condition reported a higher score of surface acting compared to participants in the natural expression condition ($M = 4.152$ versus 2.839 , $t(158) = 5.328$, $p < 0.01$). Using the difference score between self-reported emotion valence expressed in posts and the emotion valence experienced in the event, participants in the surface acting condition had a higher score than participants in the no surface acting condition ($M = 1.907$ versus 0.815 , $t(150) = 3.741$, $p < 0.01$). Using natural expression items, participants in the surface acting condition had a lower score of natural expression compared to participants in the natural expression condition ($M = 4.376$ versus 4.9 , $t(158) = -2.315$, $p = 0.02$). Thus, our manipulation was successful.

Next, we conducted path analysis to test H2a-b, and H4-H6. Like in Study 1, we controlled for the effect of felt emotion by adding self-reported event emotion score as a predictor of self-authenticity and anticipated self-enhancement. The model showed reasonable fit ($Chi-sq(6) = 14.496$, $CFI = 0.953$, $RMSEA = 0.093$, $SRMR = 0.045$). Surface acting was negatively associated with felt authenticity ($b = -0.452$, $SE = 0.232$, $p = 0.051$) but was positively associated with anticipated self-enhancement ($b = 0.485$, $SE = 0.238$, $p = 0.041$). Thus, H2a and H2b were supported. Anticipated self-enhancement was positively associated with sense of belonging ($b = 0.319$, $SE = 0.065$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H5. Both felt authenticity ($b = 0.250$, $SE = 0.053$, $p < 0.01$) and sense of belonging ($b = 0.292$, $SE = 0.061$, $p < 0.01$) were positively associated with SNS satisfaction. This supported H4 and H6. Finally, SNS satisfaction ($b = 0.331$, $SE =$

0.082, $p < 0.01$) was positively associated with SNS continuance intention. The diagram of the path analysis is shown in Figure 3.



Notes: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$. Although not shown in the diagram, we (1) added felt emotion as a control variable, and (2) controlled for the direct effect paths that involve mediators (i.e., the direct path from surface acting to sense of belonging, the direct path from anticipated self-enhancement to satisfaction, and the direct paths from felt authenticity and sense of belonging to continuance intention).

Discussion

In this study, we focused on the effect of surface acting by directly manipulating it. By adding anticipated self-enhancement to the model, we tested H2b and H5 and found that surface acting boosted users' sense of belonging through anticipating an enhanced self-image in others' eyes. In addition, we replicated the result that surface acting was negatively associated with felt authenticity, as well as the result that both felt authenticity and sense of belonging were positively associated with SNS satisfaction.

This study still had a few notable limitations. First, we only manipulated surface acting, and we were not able to test H1a-b and H3a-b. Because surface acting requires participants to positively shift their emotion valence as a first step, we cannot add positive shift to our path analysis or test corresponding hypotheses. Second, both Study 1 and Study 2 were experiments, in which we attempted to replicate real-world emotion regulation through careful wording of instructions, but it might inevitably be artificial to participants. Third, there are two alternative explanations that may drive the association among constructs: (1) depletion, which has been theorized as an outcome of emotion regulation due to the required effort to close the emotional feeling-expression gap (Scott et al. 2020a), and (2) activation/arousal shift¹, which is another important aspect of emotion and has been included as a key driver of various emotion regulation outcomes, such as felt authenticity (Scott et al. 2020a). To address these limitations and investigate alternative explanations, we conducted a survey in the final study.

Study 3

Study 3 was a survey, in which we asked participants to write a post freely under an imagined scenario of SNS post sharing, and then measured their positive shift, surface acting, and deep acting. In this study, we provided a more realistic setup for participants, tested all hypotheses proposed in the conceptual model, and also investigated alternative explanations.

Procedure and Measures

We recruited 399 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (224 female). Similar to Study 1 and Study 2, participants were asked to report their SNS use, including how long they have been using SNS and the average time they spent on SNS every day. Next, since the felt emotion could be either positive or negative in real-world cases, we randomly assigned participants to recall an event that is either somewhat positive (198 participants) or somewhat negative (201 participants), and then describe it. After recalling an event,

¹ Activation/arousal indicates how activated an emotion is. Two emotion states can be both positive in valence but different in activation (e.g., both relaxed and enthusiastic are positive but enthusiastic is higher in activation). Activation shift is the activation difference between expressed emotion and felt emotion; it is theorized as an important dimension of emotion regulation that lead to various outcomes (Scott et al. 2020a).

we instructed participants to write whatever they want in a post about the event without further instructions of positive shift or surface acting like what we had in prior studies. Participants were simply asked to “imagine that you are going to write a post about the event and post it” on their frequently used SNS. Finally, we measured their anticipated self-enhancement, felt authenticity, sense of belonging, surface acting, deep acting, felt emotion valence, and expressed emotion valence. We used the same items for these constructs as those in Study 2. To eliminate alternative explanations, we also measured depletion using five items adapted from Lin et al. (2015), and measured felt emotion activation and expressed emotion activation using three bipolar scales adapted from Berger (2011). We measured positive (activation) shift using the score difference between felt emotion valence (activation) and expressed emotion valence (activation).

Results

Demographic measures indicate that participants’ average age is 40. On average, they have used the social networking sites for 15 years, and the average time they spent on social networking sites every day is 2.7 hours. All constructs passed the reliability and validity check. We also conducted necessary tests to check the common method bias by (1) conducting Harman’s single factor test and (2) adding a method factor (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Results showed that common method variance is unlikely to be a concern in this study.

Next, we conducted path analysis to test our hypotheses, and we controlled for the effect of felt emotion as in earlier studies. The model showed reasonable fit ($Chi-sq(10) = 47.986$, $CFI = 0.954$, $RMSEA = 0.098$, $SRMR = 0.038$). Positive shift was not significantly associated with anticipated self-enhancement ($b = 0.087$, $SE = 0.056$, $p = 0.118$) and felt authenticity ($b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.051$, $p = 0.318$). Deep acting was positively associated with both anticipated self-enhancement ($b = 0.176$, $SE = 0.045$, $p < 0.01$) and felt authenticity ($b = 0.235$, $SE = 0.041$, $p < 0.01$). Surface acting was positively associated with anticipated self-enhancement ($b = 0.150$, $SE = 0.038$, $p < 0.01$) but negatively associated with felt authenticity ($b = -0.160$, $SE = 0.035$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, H2a-b and H3a-b were supported, but H1a-b were not. Anticipated self-enhancement was positively associated with sense of belonging ($b = 0.307$, $SE = 0.045$, $p < 0.01$), which supported H5. Felt authenticity ($b = 0.320$, $SE = 0.038$, $p < 0.01$) and sense of belonging ($b = 0.318$, $SE = 0.034$, $p < 0.01$) were both positively associated with SNS satisfaction, supporting H4 and H6. Moreover, SNS satisfaction ($b = 0.366$, $SE = 0.052$, $p < 0.01$) was positively associated with SNS continuance intention. The diagram of the path analysis result is shown in Figure 4.

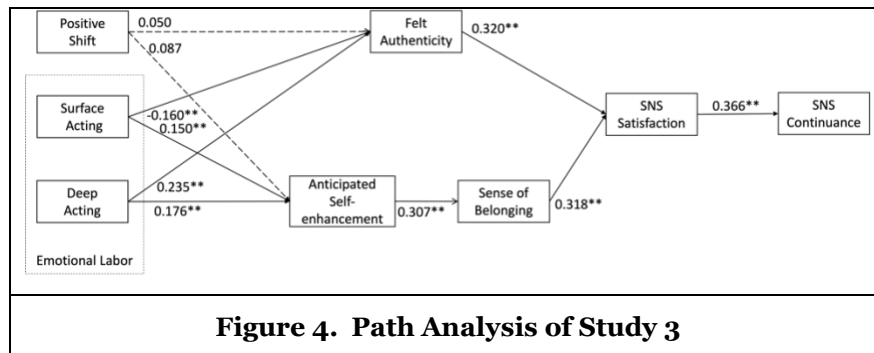


Figure 4. Path Analysis of Study 3

Notes: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$. Although not shown in the diagram, we (1) added felt emotion as a control variable, and (2) controlled for the direct effects that involve mediators (i.e., the direct paths from independent variables to the sense of belonging, the direct path from anticipated self-enhancement to satisfaction, and the direct paths from felt authenticity and sense of belonging to continuance intention).

To eliminate alternative explanations, we also conducted additional path analysis with activation shift or depletion added to the main model. When we added the activation shift as a predictor of anticipated self-enhancement and felt authenticity, results showed that activation shift is not significantly associated with anticipated self-enhancement ($b = -0.028$, $SE = 0.052$, $p = 0.598$) and felt authenticity ($b = 0.026$, $SE = 0.045$, $p = 0.568$), indicating that activation shift is not relevant to outcomes of emotion regulation in our digital context. When we added depletion as a parallel mediator to the main model we tested earlier, we found that depletion was not associated with SNS satisfaction ($b = -0.024$, $SE = 0.023$, $p = 0.296$), while the results of all our hypothesized paths were not qualitatively different.

Discussion

In this study, we replicated key results in prior two studies: (1) surface acting had countervailing effect and deep acting was beneficial to both pathways, but positive shift had no significant effect; (2) anticipated self-enhancement could explain why emotional labor affects sense of belonging on SNS; (3) both felt authenticity and sense of belonging would bolster SNS satisfaction, which enhances continuance intention. In addition, we investigated and ruled out two alternative explanations for our findings.

General Discussion

Given the prevalence of digital emotion regulation, we investigated how and why different aspects of emotion regulation (i.e., positive shift and emotional labor strategies) influence SNS users' satisfaction and intention to continue using SNS, and we propose authentic self-view (felt authenticity) and communal self-view (anticipated self-enhancement and sense of belonging) as two underlying pathways. We conducted three studies with more than one population, which showed convergent results and indicated generalizability of our research. Our empirical results revealed that only the method of emotion regulation (i.e., emotional labor) has an influence on the outcome variables through the two pathways: emotional labor enhances sense of belonging through the anticipation of self enhancement, while surface acting and deep acting have opposite effects on felt authenticity. In addition, felt authenticity and sense of belonging affect SNS users' continuance intention through satisfaction with SNS (see Table 1 for a summary of the results). These findings provide rich theoretical and practical implications.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
H1a: Positive shift -> Felt authenticity	Not supported		Not supported
H1b: Positive shift -> Anticipated self-enhancement			Not supported
H2a: Surface acting -> Felt authenticity	Supported	Supported	Supported
H2b: Surface acting -> Anticipated self-enhancement		Supported	Supported
H3a: Deep acting -> Felt authenticity	Supported		Supported
H3b: Deep acting -> Anticipated self-enhancement			Supported
H4: Felt authenticity -> SNS satisfaction	Supported	Supported	Supported
H5: Anticipated self-enhancement -> Sense of belonging		Supported	Supported
H6: Sense of belonging -> SNS satisfaction	Supported	Supported	Supported

Table 1. Summary of Results

Theoretical Implications

This work has several notable theoretical contributions. First, this paper represents an initial step in shifting scholarly attention of SNS research from interpersonal to intrapersonal effects, which can help explain the puzzling phenomenon of diversity in users' satisfaction and continuance intention. Prior literature has focused primarily on *observers* exposed to others' positive emotions, their experienced negative emotions (such as envy) and other observer-related outcomes (Burke et al. 2010; Haferkamp and Krämer 2011; Krasnova et al. 2015; Tandoc Jr et al. 2015; Wenninger et al. 2014). However, many SNS users are *active contributors* who voluntarily share their daily lives and emotional experiences (Karahanna et al. 2018; Nevo et al. 2021). Moreover, how these users regulate their emotions before expressing them on SNS is critical in explaining the intrapersonal effects of their emotional expressions. While concurring that technology can afford users' psychological need fulfillment (Karahanna et al. 2018), we argue that users may not necessarily fulfill their psychological needs such as desirable (authentic and communal) self-views on SNS that can enhance SNS satisfaction and continuance intention; instead, users' SNS experiences and outcomes largely depend on how users regulate their emotions. Thus, our research is among the first to expand the investigation of the role of emotions in SNS from an interpersonal perspective to an intrapersonal one and to reveal the importance of emotion regulation in digital settings.

Second, we draw upon Scott et al. (2020a) emotion regulation theory as the guiding framework and extend it in substantial ways. Scott et al.'s theory provides a complete characterization of emotion regulation beyond emotional labor. As the metaphor of a journey suggests, affective shift and emotional labor strategies represent different aspects of a journey. Although this theory does not contrast positive

shift with emotional labor strategies, this contrast is theoretically important in the SNS environment because they can have different intrapersonal effects on users' SNS experiences and outcomes. We found consistent evidence that customer satisfaction and intention to continue using SNS is determined not by positive shift, but by emotional labor strategies. The contrastive effects demonstrated in our research extend Scott et al.'s theory to a digital environment and stresses the need to distinguish digital emotional labor from positive shift and explore it further.

Third, prior literature on emotional labor has universally portrayed surface acting as being worse than deep acting and something to be avoided at all costs. We extend this literature by theorizing and revealing a common benefit of both strategies in SNS. For example, while surface acting is accompanied by the personal cost of felt authenticity, we found evidence that surface acting can also help users attain sense of belonging and is not always a cost (Coté 2005; Grandey and Gabriel 2015). In contrast, deep acting enables users to attain both felt authenticity and sense of belonging. By revealing the communal implication (e.g., sense of belonging) of both emotional labor strategies and an upside of surface acting in the SNS environment, our research offers a more balanced view of different emotional labor strategies in digital settings.

Practical Implications

Our research also provides important practical insights. First, findings of this research provide SNS users with insights on how they can benefit from using SNS as active contributors. Contrary to the perils of consuming others' positive emotions and feeling envious (Krasnova et al. 2015), our research shows that sharing on SNS through digital emotion regulation can be beneficial. Given the different impacts of deep acting and surface acting on one's self-views, SNS users are encouraged to wisely choose between two emotional labor strategies to reap the most benefits. For instance, for SNS users who aim at feeling true to themselves while feeling socially affiliated with others, they should put more effort into changing their feelings by actually feeling the emotions they intend to share (i.e., deep acting). Second, drawing on findings of this research, SNS companies can design better features that satisfy users' authenticity and belongingness needs, and thus increase user satisfaction and continuance intention. For instance, SNS companies can change the prompt of the text box (Lee 2011) (e.g., "What's on your mind" on Facebook) to nudge users to regulate emotions via surface acting or deep acting when sharing, such as "Say something nice. We love to hear your voice" and "Tell us about your day even if it is bad. Misfortune could be a blessing in disguise."

Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations that offer important research opportunities for future studies. First, although intrapersonal effect of emotion regulation is an important aspect of digital emotion regulation and inherits the asynchrony nature of online communication, emotion regulation is towards the audience and its effects may depend on received feedbacks (Coté 2005). Future researchers may replicate and extend our framework to investigate the moderating role of receiving feedbacks after publishing a post. Second, although we take an important perspective to investigate the antecedents of user satisfaction and continuance intention that are of concern for SNS companies, SNS users may suffer from heavy SNS use and become addicted, which is a rising issue to SNS users (Maier 2020). Future research may extend our model and explore whether digital emotion regulation would lead to continuance use in an unfavorable way (e.g., SNS addiction). Third, while SNS platforms are an important component of the digital world, other forms of online communications may also involve digital emotion regulation (e.g., online reviews). Thus, future research could extend our study to a different or broader digital context to investigate event broader forms of digital emotion regulation (e.g., down-regulation) and different psychological mechanisms.

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