

Types of Social Media Use Are Differentially Associated With Trait and Momentary Affect

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Research on how social media use (SMU) is associated with emotion is equivocal, possibly because the factor structure of SMU had not been adequately identified. Prior research has found support for four SMU types: belief-based (e.g., sharing opinions), comparison-based (e.g., body comparison), image-based (e.g., monitoring likes), and consumption-based (e.g., watching videos). In this study, we examined how participants' weekly engagement in each SMU type was associated with trait affect and how engagement in each type in real time was related to changes in momentary affect (preregistered: <https://osf.io/qupf3/>). A total of 382 college students in the spring of 2022 reported on the extent to which they engaged in each SMU type over the last week and their trait affect. They also engaged in each SMU type (randomized) for 3 min, rating their affect before and after. Only comparison-based SMU showed the same pattern of associations at trait and momentary levels, being associated with lower positive affect and higher negative affect (NA) at both timescales. Image- and consumption-based SMU were associated with higher trait NA, but resulted in people feeling better in real time. Belief-based SMU was associated with higher trait positive affect and NA, but made people feel worse in real time. Understanding how SMU types are associated with emotional experiences depends on the timeframe. Findings hold important implications for research examining how SMU is associated with mental health and well-being.

Keywords: social media, social networking sites, emotion, experimental

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Social media use (SMU) has become ubiquitous in the everyday lives of billions. Particularly among college-aged adults, a staggering 98% report using social media (SM; [Dosssett, 2020](#)), and the majority report using it several times a day ([Hruska & Maresova, 2020](#)). Despite the commonplace nature of SMU, relatively little is known regarding how SM influences people's emotions, which is critical in the quest for understanding how SMU influences psychological well-being. The overarching aim of the current investigation is to examine how different types of SMU are implicated in the trait and momentary emotional experiences of college students, the adult population that uses SM the most ([Pew Research Center, 2021](#)).

The literature contends that how SMU is associated with psychological well-being remains elusive (e.g., [Kross et al., 2021](#);

[Parry et al., 2022](#); [Valkenburg et al., 2022](#)). For instance, several reviews highlight that the associations between depressive symptomatology and SMU are largely mixed (e.g., [Seabrook et al., 2016](#); [Valkenburg et al., 2022](#)). Similarly, reviews find the association between SMU and self-esteem remains inconclusive (e.g., [Saiphoo et al., 2020](#)). Several reviews underscore inconclusive findings regarding links between SMU and subjective well-being broadly ([Meier & Krause, 2023](#); [Valkenburg, 2022](#); [Valkenburg et al., 2022](#)). These are only a few examples illustrating ambiguous links between SMU and psychological well-being.

We argue that to gain a clearer understanding of how SMU is implicated in psychological well-being, the field should consider how SMU engagement is associated with more basic emotional experiences, both at the trait level and in the moment. We also argue it is critical to consider how *different types* of SMU engagement are differentially associated with emotional experiences. Maladaptive emotional experiences (e.g., high trait negative affectivity) is a core feature of many constructs representing psychological well-being. For instance, examining how SMU is associated with trait negative affect (NA) versus depression, which reflects a constellation of symptoms, may yield more consistent associations. Further, we argue that in addition to examining how SMU engagement is associated with trait emotion, it is critical to examine how momentary SMU engagement elicits momentary emotion because the patterns may differ. For example, people who tend to experience elevated trait NA may engage with more SMU to seek positive feedback from others and feel better in the moment.

Like others ([Kross et al., 2021](#); [Parry et al., 2022](#); [Valkenburg, 2022](#); [Valkenburg et al., 2022](#)), we argue the association between SMU and psychological well-being likely depends upon the specific

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ways in which people engage with SM. SMU is nuanced, and it is likely incorrect to assume that all SMU types have the same effect on emotion. For instance, someone who frequently uses SM to engage with content with which they disagree (e.g., reading upsetting political posts) may have different emotional experiences tied to SMU compared to someone who frequently uses SM to engage with leisurely content (e.g., watching pet videos).

Few investigations have examined how SMU is associated with trait emotion. Existing research has primarily examined trait happiness and envy. The association between SMU and trait happiness is nuanced. For example, although SMU was related to less subjective trait happiness through online engagement in social comparison (Chae, 2018), SMU was related to greater subjective trait happiness through increased perceived social support (Çolak & Doğan, 2017) and receiving “likes” to posted content (Marengo et al., 2021). With regard to envy, research repeatedly finds that trait envy is tied to engaging in upward social comparison on SM (e.g., Meier & Johnson, 2022; Wu & Srite, 2021), with no literature linking envy to other SMU types. No investigations have directly tested how different types of SMU that can be reliably measured are associated with emotion.

To date, only a few studies have assessed the influence of SMU on momentary emotion, and they have also yielded inconsistent findings. For instance, laboratory-based studies have found that using SM, compared to using other websites, predicts low levels of positive affect (PA) and high levels of NA (Fardouly et al., 2015; Yuen et al., 2019), and SMU predicts increases in momentary NA (Berry et al., 2018; Willoughby et al., 2020), suggesting SMU has contrahedonic impacts on momentary emotion. However, in an experience sampling study, SMU engagement was contemporaneously associated with diminished levels of NA (Yin et al., 2022), suggesting SMU has hedonic impacts on momentary emotion in everyday life contexts. Yet, these findings were contradicted in another experience sampling study which found time spent on SM was contemporaneously associated with elevated levels of NA (Faelens et al., 2021), suggesting SMU has negative momentary emotional effects in everyday life contexts. Moreover, experimental research has shown that when people were induced into a positive or negative emotional state, SMU had the effect of reducing PA and NA, respectively (Tuck et al., 2023), suggesting SMU may broadly dampen people’s emotions. None of this research considered the specific ways in which individuals use SM.

To our knowledge, only two studies have examined the momentary emotional effects of different types of SMU, and their findings are contradictory. People experienced more PA than NA while reading others’ SM posts in an experimental study (Hoffmann et al., 2015), suggesting this passive form of use was associated with positive emotional effects. However, people experienced diminished PA during reported passive SMU and elevated NA during reported active SMU in an experience sampling study (Nereim et al., 2022), suggesting that both passive and active use had negative emotional effects in everyday life contexts. It is possible that inconsistent SMU manipulations across these studies (i.e., a lab-based experiment allowing only one SMU activity vs. an experience sampling design assessing passive vs. active SMU) contributed to these contradictory findings.

As in R. Lin & Utz (2015) and Nereim et al. (2022), researchers have primarily focused on passive versus active SMU, but a four-factor model of SMU was supported in research examining college students’ engagement in many SMU activities (Tuck & Thompson, 2024).

This four-factor model presents a more nuanced categorization of SMU than the active–passive distinction. It includes image-based, comparison-based, belief-based, and consumption-based SMU and is the only model validated for use across different SM platforms (Tuck & Thompson, 2024).

Image-based SMU describes attempts to either make a favorable social image on SM or look at the social image one may be making (e.g., posting about oneself favorably, looking at how many likes one’s post received). Image-based SMU is associated with traits related to a desire to make positive social impressions (e.g., self-promotion impression management style; Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Notably, receiving likes and positive feedback on one’s SM content is known to be associated with feeling more PA (Marengo et al., 2021). However, it is possible that greater trait NA underlies this process. For example, posting self-objectifying images on SM was associated with receiving more likes on this type of content and greater trait self-objectification (Bell et al., 2018), which is associated with poor well-being (Mercurio & Landry, 2008; Tiggemann, 2011). Because people presumably engage in image-based SMU to look good and feel better about themselves, when people engage in image-based SMU, they may feel more PA in the moment. However, it is possible image-based SMU is associated with trait NA, motivating people’s desire to engage in this form of SMU to gain positive social feedback and feel better.

Comparison-based SMU describes using SM to compare oneself to others or to one’s own past (e.g., body comparison, reminiscing about the past). It is associated with traits related to poor social and emotional well-being (e.g., low self-esteem; Tuck & Thompson, 2024). In a review of experimental research, McComb et al. (2023) found that social comparison on SM was related to worse body image, subjective well-being, mental health outcomes, and self-esteem across the literature. It is likely that comparison-based SMU is positively associated with trait NA and negatively associated with trait PA. Because social comparison on SMU is known to be associated with poorer emotional well-being and consists of activities thought to be maladaptive (e.g., body comparison), it follows that when people engage in comparison-based SMU, they may also feel more NA and less PA in the moment.

Belief-based SMU describes SMU aimed at feeling or expressing one’s negative opinions (e.g., commenting negatively on others’ posts, looking at content one finds negative). Belief-based SMU is associated with traits related to poorer emotional well-being and maladaptive social functioning and regulation (e.g., low life satisfaction; Tuck & Thompson, 2024). For example, doomscrolling, or using SM to attend to negative information, is linked to greater anxiety and depression and poor self-control (Shabahang et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). In addition, SM trolling behavior, or using SM to voice negativity or maliciousness, has been linked to boredom and increased need for revenge (Quandt et al., 2022), and using SM to self-disclose negative information was related to attempts to receive social validation, low self-esteem, greater anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Luo & Hancock, 2020). Taken together, belief-based SMU may be associated with greater trait NA. When people engage in belief-based SMU, they may become activated and “riled up,” meaning this SMU type may make people feel more NA in the moment.

Consumption-based SMU describes using SM to consume content (e.g., watching videos, aimlessly scrolling through feeds). Consumption-based SMU is associated with positive outcomes

(e.g., enjoyment on SM; Tuck & Thompson, 2024). These associations between consumption-based SMU and positive outcomes were consistent with existing research. For instance, engaging in SMU to consume inspirational content (but not frequency of SMU) was associated with greater gratitude, awe, vitality, prosocial motivations, and prosocial behaviors (Janicke et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, engaging in SM for entertainment purposes (e.g., watching videos of concerts) was associated with positive emotional outcomes such as emotional release of tension and distraction from stressful current events (e.g., quarantine; Tkáčová et al., 2021). Indeed, engaging in SMU for entertainment purposes can be an effective form of emotion regulation (Du et al., 2021). Since consumption-based SMU appears adaptive, it is possible that more psychologically healthy people are most likely to engage in this type of use, meaning it could be associated with increased trait PA and decreased trait NA. Because people engage in consumption-based SMU to consume presumably entertaining content, people may feel more PA and less NA during this type of use.

Taken together, literature reflects how each of these four SMU types is associated with traits reflecting personality and psychological well-being. However, no one has examined how each is associated with the experience of PA and NA both at a trait-level and in the moment. Understanding how each SMU type is associated with and influences emotion could be important in understanding how each is associated with well-being more broadly.

The first aim of the current investigation was to examine how weekly engagement in each type of SMU was associated with trait affect (Aim 1a). Aim 1a hypotheses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Hypotheses and Findings for Aims 1 and 2

Variable	Hypothesis	Finding
Weekly engagement		
Image-based SMU		
Trait PA	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Trait NA	+	+
Comparison-based SMU		
Trait PA	–	<i>ns</i>
Trait NA	+	+
Belief-based SMU		
Trait PA	<i>ns</i>	+
Trait NA	+	+
Consumption-based SMU		
Trait PA	+	<i>ns</i>
Trait NA	–	+
Real-time engagement		
Image-based SMU		
Momentary PA	Increase	Increase
Momentary NA	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Comparison-based SMU		
Momentary PA	Decrease	Decrease
Momentary NA	Increase	Increase
Belief-based SMU		
Momentary PA	<i>ns</i>	Decrease
Momentary NA	Increase	Increase
Consumption-based SMU		
Momentary PA	Increase	Increase
Momentary NA	Decrease	Decrease

Note. SMU = social media use; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect; *ns* = not significant.

We also assessed which type of weekly SMU engagement was most strongly associated with trait emotions (Aim 1b). We predicted that weekly consumption-based SMU would have the strongest association with trait PA, even after accounting for the other three types of SM use, and that weekly comparison-based SMU would have the strongest association with trait NA, even after accounting for the other three types of SMU.

Our second aim was to examine how real-time engagement in image-, comparison-, belief-, and consumption-based SMU impacts momentary PA and NA (Aim 2a). Aim 2a hypotheses are summarized in Table 1. We also examined which types of SMU had the greatest effects on momentary affect (Aim 2b). We predicted consumption-based SMU would elicit the greatest increase in PA compared to the other three types of use and that comparison-based SMU would elicit the greatest increase in NA compared to the other three types of use (Hypothesis 2a).

We tested hypotheses by recruiting a large sample of college students and measuring their engagement in image-, comparison-, belief-, and consumption-based SMU in the past week and trait PA and NA. Participants also used their own SM to engage in each of the four types of SM. We assessed changes in momentary emotion before and after each type. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study.

Method

Transparency and Openness

Study aims, hypotheses, and analytic plan were preregistered through the Open Science Foundation prior to data collection (<https://osf.io/qupf3/>). Raw data and analysis scripts can also be found via the same link.

Participants

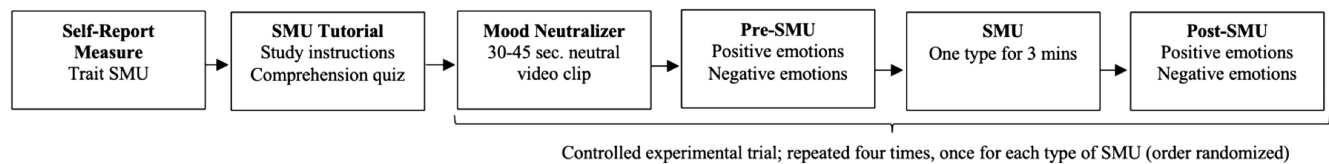
A total of 386 students at a private Midwestern university participated in the study. Four individuals were excluded due to incomplete data, yielding a total sample of 382 (56.0% women, 40.6% men, 1.6% nonbinary, and 1.8% unreported). Sample size was determined based on another study for which data were being collected. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years ($M = 19.82$, $SD = 1.22$). Regarding race, participants identified as follows: White (49.5%), Asian (25.7%), African American or Black (12.6%), multiracial (6.5%), Middle Eastern (1.3%; 4.5% unreported). About 12.6% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latinx.

Procedure

Study procedures took place online in spring of 2022, and interested individuals learned about the study through an online website that lists active university studies. Participants were eligible if they were 18 years old, had audio capabilities on the device on which they would be completing the study, and had at least one SM profile.

A summary of study procedures can be found in Figure 1. Participants first read and agreed to an informed consent, and then they completed the Social Media Use Scale (SMUS). Next, participants completed an audio check where they indicated the content of an audio clip from five choices (i.e., “The table is

Figure 1
Procedural Overview



Note. SMU = social media use.

brown”). Participants who got this question wrong ($n = 0$) were ineligible to participate.

Next, participants learned about the four different types of SMU and were provided with details about the study procedures. More specifically, they were told that they would use their own SM four times for 3 min at a time, and each time, they would only engage in one type of SMU. Then they were asked several multiple-choice questions designed to assess whether they understood the experiment’s instructions. If participants got a question incorrect, the survey presented the correct answer.

The following directions appeared before each of the four SMU trials, “When you get to the next page, you will have 3 min to engage in one or more of the following activities on your social media: [SMU activities categorizing that SMU type]. Please do not do anything that is not listed above. These activities will be presented on the next page too. Reminder: You may use any of the following site(s): Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, Tumblr, Snapchat, TikTok, BeReal. Again, please do NOT use direct messaging. Please proceed to the next page to start the 3 min period.” A summary of SMU activities participants were directed to engage in for each trial can be found in Table 2.

Next, participants were directed to a screen presenting information about one type of SMU, including examples of SMU activities. These activities were identical to the respective activities for each type of SMU on the SMUS. The order of type of SMU was randomized within and between participants. They were then instructed to engage in that type of SMU for 3 min. During engagement in each SMU trial, participants were again provided with a description of that type of SMU and the activities that encompass it. At the end of 3 min, a chime rang, and the survey automatically advanced to the next page.

Before and after they engaged in each of the four SMU trials, participants indicated the extent to which they were feeling PA and NA. They also indicated from a checklist which SMU activities from that trial they engaged in, which included three fields for “other (please describe).” We planned to exclude participants’ data for trials during which they did not indicate engaging in any of the allowed activities for the respective SM type, but this did not occur.

Prior to each SMU trial, participants watched one of four 45–60 s film clips, the order of which was randomized across trials. This was to help ensure the emotional effects from one trial did not carry into the next. Film clips were from *The Other Woman* (2014, 4:49), *Ex Machina* (2014, 1:04:14), *Labour Day* (2013, 1:03:06), and *Three Colours: Blue* (1993). Each have been validated to elicit neutral emotions (Schaefer et al., 2010; Zupan & Eskritt, 2020). After the film clip, the survey transitioned participants to the next screen where they indicated their momentary affect. Once all four trials were complete, participants watched another neutral film clip

from *The Lover* (Schaefer et al., 2010). They then completed self-report measures not relevant to the current investigation and finally were presented with a debriefing statement. Students were provided course research credit for participation. All procedures and protocols were approved by the institutional review board at Washington University in St. Louis.

Self-Report Questionnaires

Weekly Engagement in SMU

We assessed participants’ weekly engagement in each type of SMU with the SMUS (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). The SMUS is a 17-item scale that assesses how frequently individuals engaged in specific SM activities in the past week from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*hourly or more*). It consists of four subscales: image-based (e.g., “Read comments to my own content”), comparison-based

Table 2

Social Media Activities Participants Were Directed to Engage in for Each Type of Social Media Use

Type of social media use	Social media activity
Image-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make/share a post or story about something positive that is personally about you • Look at how many people liked, commented on, shared your content, or followed/friended you • Read comments to your own content • Edit and/or delete your own social media content • Play with photo filtering/photo editing
Comparison-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare your body or appearance to others’ • Compare your life or experiences to others’ • Reminisce about the past
Belief-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make/share a post or story about something negative that is personally about you • Make/share a post or story about something negative that is NOT personally about you • Comment unsupportively or dislike/“react” unsupportively on other’s post(s) • Seek out content that you morally or ethically disagree with
Consumption-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scroll aimlessly through your feed(s) • Look at others’ stories • Navigate to others’ profiles in your social network (e.g., friends or friends of friends) • Navigate to others’ pages who you do not know (e.g., influencers or other famous people) • Watch videos such as memes, news content, how-tos/recipes, etc.

(e.g., “Compared my life or experiences to others”), belief-based (e.g., “Commented unsupportively or disliked/”reacted” unsupportively on other’s post(s)”), and consumption-based (e.g., “Scrolled aimlessly through my feed(s)”). Participants receive a score for each type of SMU. This scale was developed for use on college students, demonstrating good convergent validity and reliability (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Internal consistencies of subscale items in the current sample were good ($\alpha_{\text{image-based}} = .81$, $\alpha_{\text{comparison-based}} = .77$, $\alpha_{\text{belief-based}} = .84$, $\alpha_{\text{consumption-based}} = .80$).

Trait Emotions

Participants’ trait PA and NA were measured with the basic positive and negative emotions subscales of the extended Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-X (Watson & Clark, 1994). These subscales contain 18 positive emotion items (e.g., happy, confident) and 23 negative emotion items (e.g., sad, angry) scored with regard to the past “few weeks” from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*extremely*). Items are averaged to compute a total score for each subscale. Internal consistency of items in the current sample was excellent ($\alpha_{\text{PA}} = .93$, $\alpha_{\text{NA}} = .94$).

Momentary Level

Momentary Affect

We assessed participants’ momentary PA and NA separately. Participants were asked “To what extent are you currently experiencing POSITIVE (NEGATIVE) emotions?” from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a very great bit*; e.g., Fernandez-Alvarez et al., 2021).

Analytic Plan

All analyses were conducted in R Data Analysis Software (R Core Team., 2022). To examine how weekly engagement in each type of SMU correlated with trait PA and NA (Aim 1a), we computed Pearson correlations between participants’ trait PA (or NA) and their weekly engagement scores for each type of SMU. To determine which types of weekly SMU were most strongly and uniquely associated with trait PA and NA (Aim 1b), we computed two multiple regression models in which standardized trait PA or NA scores were predicted by standardized weekly SMU scores on all four types of SMU.

To assess changes in PA and NA during each SMU type (Aim 2a), we computed eight paired sample *t*-tests in which PA (or NA) immediately after the SMU trial was tested against PA (or NA)

immediately before the trial. To determine whether changes in emotion were significantly different from one another when examined in the same model (Aim 2b), we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in which the difference between PA and NA post-SMU trial compared to pre-SMU trial was compared across all four SMU trials. We followed-up the MANOVA with two analysis of variance tests in which PA and NA difference scores, respectively, were compared across all four trials, and a post hoc Tukey test was conducted to determine significant pairwise differences. These follow-up analyses are a deviation from our preregistered analysis plan to account for the fact that due to the nested nature of our data, trials are not independent in the present study.

We also conducted a follow-up analysis in which we correlated people’s average reported PA and NA before and after SMU with their trait PA and NA. This was done in recognition of the fact that momentary and trait SMU were assessed using different methods. We wanted to confirm reports were correlated with one another despite these differing methods.

Power Analysis

A post hoc power analysis was conducted for a repeated measures MANOVA with within- and between-level interaction effects using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). Based on results from the MANOVA calculated for Aim 2, the analysis included a Pillai’s trace of .214 and an error of .05. This test revealed a power of .95 to detect effects, which is higher than the conventional power of .80 in psychological research (Cohen, 1992).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and correlations for each of the trait measures can be found in Table 3. As in previous research (Tuck & Thompson, 2024), weekly engagement scores for the four SMU types showed small to moderate correlations with one another except for image- and belief-based SMU, which were strongly correlated.

How Is Weekly Engagement in Each SMU Type Associated With Trait Emotion? (Aim 1)

A summary of the hypotheses and findings for Aim 1a are presented in Table 1. Weekly image-based SMU was not significantly associated with trait PA ($df = 369$, $p = .081$) but was significantly

Table 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Trait-Level Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Image-based SMU	2.37	1.28	—					
2. Comparison-based SMU	3.97	1.83	.47*	—				
3. Belief-based SMU	1.70	1.13	.69*	.35*	—			
4. Consumption-based SMU	5.31	1.57	.46*	.55*	.25*	—		
5. Trait NA	2.28	0.74	.19*	.35*	.21*	.12*	—	
6. Trait PA	2.72	0.74	.09	-.07	.11*	.01	-.19*	—

Note. SMU = social media use; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect.

* $p < .05$.

associated with higher trait NA ($df = 367, p < .001$); both findings were consistent with hypotheses. Weekly comparison-based SMU was not significantly associated with trait PA ($df = 370, p = .199$), which was inconsistent with hypotheses that this type of use would be related to lower trait PA. However, as expected, it was significantly associated with higher trait NA ($df = 368, p < .001$). Weekly belief-based SMU was significantly associated with higher trait PA ($p = .035$), inconsistent with hypotheses that this type of use would not correlate with PA. However, as expected, it was significantly associated with higher NA ($df = 370, p < .001$). Weekly consumption-based SMU was not significantly associated with trait PA ($df = 369, p = .774$) and was significantly positively associated with trait NA ($df = 367, p = .024$). These findings are inconsistent with hypotheses that weekly consumption-based SMU would be related to higher trait PA and lower trait NA.

All four weekly SMU scores were fitted in a model predicting trait PA, which explained a significant proportion of variance in PA scores, $R^2 = .03, F(4, 366) = 2.84, p = .024$. Only the effect of weekly comparison-based SMU remained significant, showing a negative association with trait PA ($\beta = -.16, r^2 = .02, p = .011$). Weekly consumption-based SMU did not demonstrate a significant unique positive association with trait PA ($\beta = .05, r^2 = .00, p = .484$),

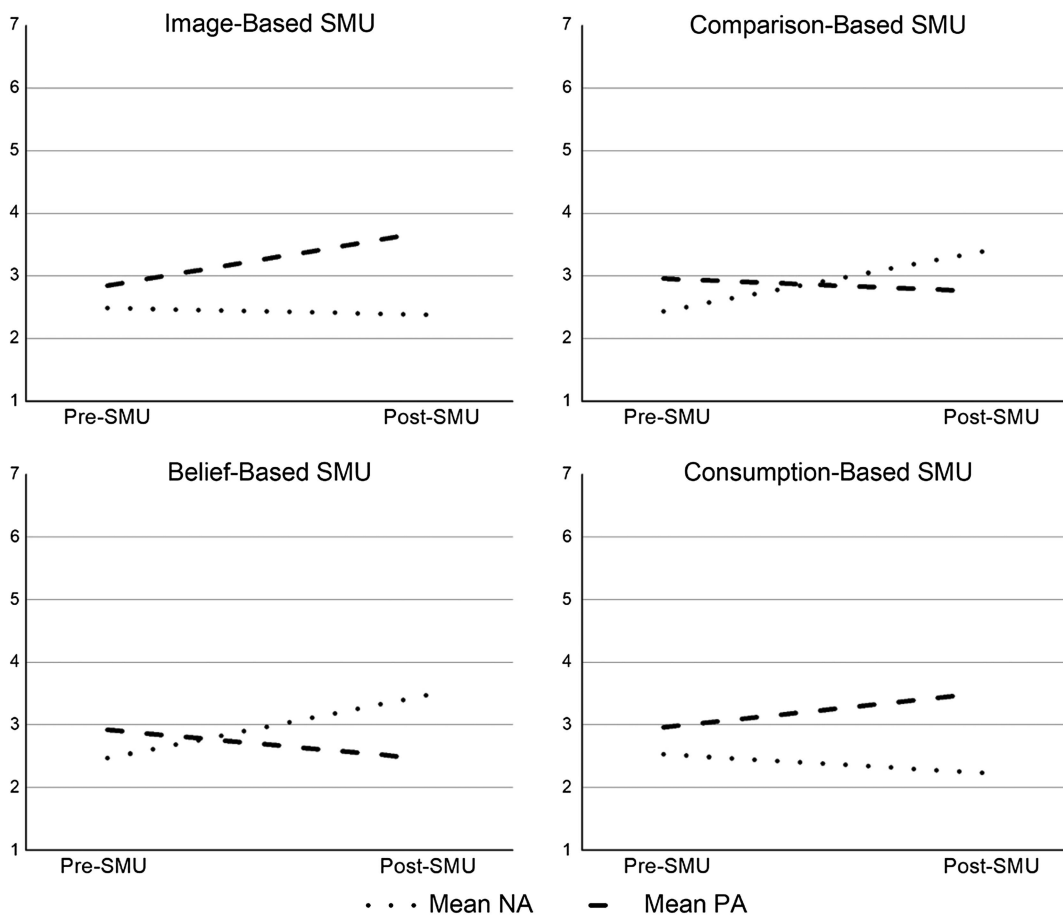
inconsistent with hypotheses. In addition, neither weekly image-based ($\beta = .07, r^2 = .00, p = .350$) nor belief-based ($\beta = .11, r^2 = .01, p = .135$) SMU uniquely predicted trait PA, consistent with hypotheses.

All four weekly SMU scores were fitted in a model predicting trait NA, which explained a significant proportion of variance in trait NA scores, $R^2 = .14, F(4, 364) = 15.08, p < .001$. Weekly comparison-based SMU showed the largest and only unique significant positive association with trait NA ($\beta = .38, r^2 = .09, p < .001$), consistent with hypotheses. Weekly consumption-based SMU showed the largest and only unique significant negative association with trait NA ($\beta = -.12, r^2 = .01, p = .046$), inconsistent with hypotheses that consumption-based SMU would be uniquely associated with greater trait PA only. Neither weekly image-based ($\beta = .00, r^2 = .00, p = .964$) nor belief-based ($\beta = .10, r^2 = .00, p = .142$) SMU uniquely predicted trait NA, consistent with hypotheses.

How Do Different SMU Types Evoke Momentary Emotion? (Aim 2)

A summary of the hypotheses and findings for Aim 2a are presented in Table 1. Changes in emotion during each type of SMU are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Mean Changes in PA and NA During Each Type of SMU



Note. SMU = social media use; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect.

Image-Based SMU

As expected, there was a significant increase in PA following image-based SMU ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.43$) compared to before image-based SMU, $M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.37$; $t(376) = 11.56$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [10.54, 12.58]. Also as hypothesized, NA did not significantly decrease following image-based SMU ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.31$) compared to before, $M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.31$; $t(376) = -1.76$, $p = .080$, 95% CI [-0.24, 0.01].

Comparison-Based SMU

As expected, there was a significant decrease in PA following comparison-based SMU ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.37$) compared to before comparison-based SMU, $M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.34$; $t(376) = -2.65$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [-0.36, -0.05]. There was a significant increase in NA following comparison-based SMU ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.56$) compared to before, $M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.33$; $t(376) = 12.49$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.82, 1.12], which was also consistent with hypotheses.

Belief-Based SMU

There was a significant decrease in PA following belief-based SMU ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.36$) compared to before belief-based SMU, $M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.41$; $t(378) = -6.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.61, -0.32]. This finding was not consistent with our hypothesis that belief-based SMU would not impact PA. However, as expected, there was a significant increase in NA following belief-based SMU ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.50$) compared to before belief-based SMU, $M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.30$; $t(378) = 13.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.86, 1.16].

Consumption-Based SMU

There was a significant increase in PA following consumption-based SMU ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.39$) compared to before consumption-based SMU, $M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.33$; $t(376) = 7.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.43, 0.71]. There was a significant decrease in NA following consumption-based SMU ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.21$) compared to before consumption-based SMU, $M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.34$; $t(376) = -4.98$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.18]. Both of these findings were consistent with hypotheses.

A MANOVA comparing difference scores in PA and NA from pre-SMU trial to post-SMU trial for all four trials revealed a significant effect for both PA, $F(3, 1506) = 71.72$, $p < .001$ and NA, $F(3, 1506) = 99.50$, $p < .001$. An analysis of variance on SMU

trials predicting change in PA yielded significant variation among trials, $F(3, 1507) = 71.72$, $p < .001$. A post hoc Tukey test showed that the image-based SMU trial evoked significantly more PA than the other three trials ($ps < .022$), inconsistent with hypotheses that consumption-based SMU would evoke the largest PA increase. However, it is notable that the consumption-based trial did evoke significantly more PA than the comparison- and belief-based trials ($ps < .001$), and the difference between the belief- and comparison-based SMU trials in evoked PA was not significant ($p = .058$). An analysis of variance on SMU trials predicting change in NA again yielded significant variation among trials, $F(3, 1506) = 99.50$, $p < .001$. A post hoc Tukey test showed that the comparison-based SMU trial evoked significantly more NA than the image- and consumption-based SMU trials ($ps < .001$), but the difference between comparison- and belief-based trials was not significant ($p = .973$). These results partially support hypotheses that comparison-based SMU would evoke the largest increase in NA. The comparison- and belief-based SMU trials evoked more NA than the image- and consumption-based trials ($ps < .001$), and the difference between the image- and consumption-based SMU trials was not significant ($p = .247$). A summary of mean changes in PA and NA for each SMU type and how they differ from one another can be found in Table 4.

Follow-Up Analyses

Correlations Between Momentary and Trait Affect

Follow-up analyses confirmed that participants' momentary PA scores averaged across the eight momentary measures were positively associated with trait PA ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), and participants' momentary NA scores averaged across the eight momentary measures were positively associated with trait NA ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Participants' average momentary PA scores were not associated with trait NA ($r = -.04$, $p = .488$), and participants' average momentary NA scores were negatively associated with trait PA ($r = -.12$, $p = .019$). These findings suggest an overall positive relationship between the emotions people experience around SMU and their trait emotion.

Supplementary

We assessed how changes in emotion during each of the four SMU trials were associated with trait NA and PA as well. These results can be found in [Supplemental Materials](#).

Table 4
Mean Changes in PA and NA for Each Social Media Use (SMU) Type and How They Differ From One Another

Variable	Image-based SMU	Comparison-based SMU	Belief-based SMU	Consumption-based SMU
Change in PA	0.87 _a	-0.20 _c	-0.47 _c	0.57 _b
Change in NA	-0.11 _b	0.97 _a	1.01 _a	-0.29 _b

Note. Subscripts of the same letter indicate no significant difference between means within PA and NA (e.g., comparison- and belief-based SMU do not differ in the extent to which they elicit change in PA). PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect.

Discussion

The overarching goal of the current investigation was to better understand the ways in which types of SMU are related to emotional experience, focusing on image-based, comparison-based, belief-based, and consumption-based. To that end, we assessed participants' recent weekly engagement in four types of SMU and had participants engage in each SMU type in real time. Our findings, many of which support our theorizing, suggest that weekly engagement in these types of SMU is correlated with differing trait levels of emotion, and real-time engagement in these SMU types differentially impacts momentary emotion. Most findings were consistent with our preregistered hypotheses.

Image-based SMU focuses on using SM to create and monitor a positive social image (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Findings were consistent with our hypotheses that weekly image-based SMU would be associated with higher levels of trait NA, but that its real-time engagement would increase momentary PA. In fact, this type of SMU led to the largest increase in momentary PA of all SMU types. These findings highlight important nuances when examining the impact of SMU on well-being. They suggest the same SM activities can be beneficial in the moment (at least when increasing PA is desired) but associated with maladaptive outcomes more generally. A behavior associated with feeling good in the moment but associated with longer term negative outcomes is not uncommon. For example, people may feel good when drinking alcohol, but frequent drinking may be a symptom of an alcohol use disorder, for example, (Paulus et al., 2021). Similarly, people may engage in image-based SMU to seek external validation and feel good when they otherwise experience high levels of trait NA. However, we can only speculate about the directionality of the association because the associations examined in the present study were correlational.

Comparison-based SMU is using SM to compare oneself to others or to one's past, and it is associated with a host of negative outcomes (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Consistent with this, as expected, we found comparison-based SMU was associated with lower PA and higher NA at the trait level and in real time. These findings underscore that, unlike image-based SMU, comparison-based SMU is associated with feeling worse in everyday life *and* in the moment. Such insights clarify to how these SMU types are similar and different from one another. Based on the findings, it is unclear whether frequent engagement in comparison-based SMU leads to more trait NA, or whether trait NA leads to more frequent engagement in comparison-based SMU. For instance, it could be that people are more likely to engage in comparison-based SMU when experiencing greater NA. Still, taken together with findings that comparison-based SMU is associated with negative outcomes (e.g., low self-esteem; Tuck & Thompson, 2024), and that people most often regulate emotions to feel less NA and maintain or increase PA (i.e., hedonic regulation; English et al., 2017; Riediger et al., 2009), comparison-based SMU seems to be an emotionally maladaptive form of SMU behavior both long-term and in the moment.

Belief-based SMU focuses on using SM to feel and express one's negative beliefs and opinions (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Weekly engagement in belief-based SMU was associated with more trait PA and NA, suggesting that belief-based SMU is associated with greater emotionality in general. This contrasts with our expectations that belief-based SMU would be associated with trait NA alone.

However, real-time engagement in belief-based SMU was associated with decreases in momentary PA (unexpected finding) and increases in momentary NA (expected finding), illustrating that this type of use made people feel worse in the moment. Future research could assess people's reasons for engaging in belief-based SMU. For example, people may engage in belief-based SMU because they have feelings that would benefit from being channeled into another behavior (e.g., winning an online political argument). This theorizing is consistent with research indicating that upregulating negative emotions (e.g., anger) can help people perform better (Kalokerinos et al., 2017; Tamir et al., 2008). We also speculate that people engage in belief-based SMU to "get riled up" and think research should examine more specific emotions that follow engagement in belief-based SMU (e.g., anger). Overall, we predict that certain emotions that motivate action, such as anger (e.g., Valentino et al., 2011), are most likely to both proceed and follow engagement in belief-based SMU, suggesting affect may both lead to greater engagement in belief-based SMU and result from greater engagement in belief-based SMU.

Consumption-based SMU focuses on using SM to consume content (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Real-time engagement in consumption-based SMU resulted in increases in PA and decreases in NA, consistent with our hypotheses, showing this type of use made people feel better in the moment. Contrary to hypotheses that weekly consumption-based SMU would be associated with greater trait PA and lower trait NA, it was associated with higher trait NA and not associated with trait PA. It is possible that consumption-based SMU leads to more trait NA, or that more trait NA leads to greater consumption-based SMU. Considering the latter, these patterns could reflect people's attempts to use SM to influence their feelings, or digital emotion regulation (Smith et al., 2022; Wadley et al., 2020). People may feel differently when engaging in specific types of SMU compared to their trait affect because they are using SM with the intention of impacting their feelings. For example, people may engage in consumption-based SMU to feel less NA, knowing (explicitly or implicitly) that it could have this impact on their emotions. Future research could utilize experimental mood induction or ecological momentary assessment to examine whether people use specific SMU types to regulate their emotions.

Taken together, these findings hold important implications. First, people should be aware that there are four types of SMU, each of which could elicit emotions differently. If people are aware that SMU types make them feel differently, they may be better able to engage with SM in more emotionally adaptive ways. Similarly, mental health providers could consider working with their clients to bring awareness to the emotions SMU types may evoke. Many evidence-based psychotherapies, including cognitive behavioral therapy and emotion-focused therapy, emphasize enhancing emotional awareness (Greenberg & Watson, 2006; Kocovski & MacKenzie, 2016). In addition, clinicians may consider exploring clients' reasons for engaging in certain SMU types. For instance, clients may report they engage in image-based SMU to feel good, but our findings show image-based SMU is associated with trait negative emotionality. Clinicians may encourage their clients to consider why image-based SMU makes them feel good.

Broadly, we hope that these findings contribute to building clearer interventions targeted at increasing healthy SMU habits. Our results that image- and consumption-based SMU made people feel better

in the moment suggests that these types of use may be adaptive and emotionally beneficial, although future work is needed to understand how to sustain these positive emotional effects long term. That comparison- and belief-based SMU made people feel worse in the moment and were associated with trait negative emotionality suggests that these types of use may be maladaptive and emotionally nonbeneficial, although future research is needed to determine which exact negative emotions may be evoked by these types of use (e.g., sadness vs. anger). Further, individual differences (e.g., psychopathology) may play important roles in how SMU is associated with and evokes emotion. Thus, while these findings lead to as many questions as answers, they create a foundation for further exploration into how we can start to create recommendations for healthy versus unhealthy SMU behaviors.

One important avenue for future research is to examine the role of motivation when people select different SMU types. Our intention in this investigation was to measure SMU behaviors, not motives specifically. However, this is not to say that the behaviors or item wording (e.g., “Read comments to my own content”) do not reflect motives. Future research should examine people’s motives for engaging in SMU types and how motives impact people’s real-time emotion. For instance, self-determination theory suggests people may engage in SMU for intrinsic motivational purposes—to gain knowledge, a sense of integration into a larger social structure, and a sense of achievement—or for extrinsic motivational purposes—to attain an outcome for its instrumental value, such as gaining approval from others to boost one’s ego (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Increased intrinsic motivation and a consequent sense of autonomy have been linked with enhanced psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020), and it is possible that people feel better when engaged in SMU for intrinsic versus extrinsic motivational purposes. It is also possible that different SMU types fulfill different motives. For instance, consumption-based SMU may fulfill one’s intrinsic motive to gain knowledge, whereas image-based SMU may fulfill one’s extrinsic motivate to gain acclaim and social approval. Further, people may have different motives for engaging in the same SMU type. For example, while one person may view comments to their own content (image-based SMU) because they are concerned about their own self-image, another person may want to engage in dialogue via SM. The role of motives for engaging in SMU behaviors may help explain individual differences in associations between different SMU types and emotional experiences.

Future research should investigate the association between perceived social support and emotions evoked during engagement in different SMU types. Many have argued a benefit awarded by SM is it facilitates social connections (e.g., Baker & Yang, 2018; X. Lin & Kishore, 2021; Rosen et al., 2022; Selkie et al., 2020). However, minimal research has examined how this perceived social support may impact emotion during engagement in SMU types. Is perceived social support on SM emotionally beneficial? People were more willing to share opinions on SM (i.e., belief-based SMU) when they perceive greater social support on SM (Chun & Lee, 2017). We think it is possible this greater willingness to share beliefs when feeling social support could lead to less of an increase in NA during belief-based SMU. In addition, social comparison on SM (i.e., comparison-based SMU) could elicit NA, which in turn decrease perceived social support (Lee, 2022). These proposed hypotheses

highlight the likely complex associations between perceived social support and SMU types in eliciting users’ emotions.

In addition, it will be important for future research to examine associations between engagement in SMU types and trait emotion longitudinally. Such investigations will help determine causal links between SMU and trait emotion that cannot be determined by the one-time correlational results examined here. Longitudinal research would help elucidate whether frequent engagement in certain SMU types (e.g., comparison-based) precede people’s tendency to experience greater trait NA, for instance, or whether greater trait NA precedes people’s tendency to engage in specific SMU types. Such insights will be imperative for informing early interventions aimed at helping people develop healthy SMU habits.

Constraints on Generality

Despite promising findings from this multimethod investigation, it is important to recognize our sample was composed of college students. It is important that future research directly test the generalizability of findings across age groups. In addition, it is important to note that some associations between trait affect and weekly SMU engagement were no longer significant when all SMU types were taken into accounted (i.e., associations for image- and belief-based SMU). Although this trend of findings was generally consistent with our hypotheses, they underscore some associations were stronger than others, and weaker associations should be interpreted with greater caution.

As discussed above, we think motivation may play an important role in naturalistic settings. Indeed, others have found people engage in SMU to fulfill broader motives (e.g., to seek popularity, for entertainment; Al-Menayes, 2015; Rodgers et al., 2021). In these everyday life contexts where people are motivated to engage in SMU to fulfill a motivational drive, we expect effects would be even larger than those observed in the present study. Experience sampling could directly examine how SMU types are associated with people’s emotions in everyday life contexts when people are motivated to engage in SMU behaviors themselves, rather than being instructed to engage in them by an experimenter.

In addition, weekly SMU engagement in the current investigation was assessed with self-reports rather than objective measures. This was because objective measures would not provide enough information about specific SMU behaviors. Even recording participants’ smartphone screens while they engaged in SMU during the week would provide inadequate detail. For instance, a person may pause on a friend’s post because they are comparing themselves to them (comparison-based SMU), disagreed with what they shared (belief-based SMU), to simply read what they had to say (consumption-based SMU), or because they stopped scrolling while someone spoke to them (no SMU). These objective methods also raise ethical concerns such that the people in participants’ social networks whose content would be collected in the study did not consent to having their content used in this way. Despite the complications, it will be important to develop tools and precedent for collecting these data that are not focused on self-report.

Another limitation of the current investigation is that momentary and trait emotion were measured using different methods. While trait emotions were assessed with using a series of individual emotion items, momentary emotions were assessed by one PA and one NA

item before and after each SMU trial. This was a design choice intended to reduce participant burden during the experimental trials. Given this difference, results regarding how they compare to one another should be interpreted with caution. Having said this, it is reassuring that participants' momentary PA and NA reports were strongly associated with their reported trait PA and NA, respectively, which lend validity to our two-item approach to measuring momentary emotion.

Despite the ubiquity of SMU, researchers have only begun to understand how SMU is implicated in people's well-being and mental health. Findings from the current investigation underscore the need to consider momentary and trait emotional correlates of different types of SMU engagement. By understanding how SMU types are implicated in emotion, we can better conceptualize the nuanced ways in which SMU impacts emotional well-being and develop interventions to promote healthier SMU habits.

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