

The Impact of Social Media on Individual Happiness and Anxiety from the Perspective of Existential Philosophy: Mediating Effects of Psychological Needs

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Social media is closely related to people's daily lives and studies, subtly influencing their psychology. To explore the effects of social media on individual happiness and anxiety, this paper employs an existential philosophy analytical framework to transcend the limitations of positivism by deconstructing the 'freedom-responsibility paradox' and 'authenticity-alienation tension' inherent in social media use. The results reveal three key findings: (1) Social media use significantly enhances individual happiness; (2) Social media use reduces anxiety levels; (3) Basic psychological needs mediate the relationship between social media use and individual happiness. The results of this study have an important reference value for individuals to use social media rationally and to recognise the positive and negative effects of social media on individual happiness and anxiety.

Keywords: existentialist philosophy, social media, happiness, anxiety, basic psychological needs, mediating effects

INTRODUCTION

With the continuous progress of network information technology, the proliferation of social platforms and their growing user bases have subtly transformed people's work and lifestyles. According to the *Digitalization 2021: China* report, there are currently 931 million social media users in China, a significant number. While social media offers convenience and facilitates individual happiness, an excessive use has introduced negative impacts, such as heightened anxiety and depression, which hinder productivity and well-being.

Existential philosophy, which explores themes such as individual freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of existence, offers a critical lens for understanding these psychological dynamics (Monin, Miller 2001). Regarding the impact of social media on individual happiness, scholars are divided into two schools of thought. One school of thought argues that the prolonged or intense social media engagement negatively correlates with well-being,

particularly among adolescents with the limited self-control (Wang 2021). Conversely, other scholars assert that strategic and purposeful social media use can directly enhance subjective well-being by fulfilling life and learning needs (Ni, Shao 2019; Wang, Zhou 2019). Regarding the effect of social media on individual anxiety, most scholars have verified and concluded that there is a correlation between social media and the generation of individual anxiety, and the individual's excessive reliance on social media can lead to the generation of individual anxiety, loneliness, and other negative emotions, which affects the individual's everyday life (Dong et al. 2022).

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (1999) defined happiness (eudaimonia) as 'the practice of virtue in the soul', while Epicurus (2020) emphasised a hedonistic view of happiness as 'freedom from physical pain and mental disturbance'. Seneca (2015), from the perspective of Stoicism, advocated achieving mental tranquility through rational self-restraint. These classical concepts of happiness provide a historical reference for contemporary existential philosophy – Sartre's 'existence precedes essence' can be seen as a modern deconstruction of Aristotle's theory of 'potentiality and actuality', emphasising that individuals construct the meaning of happiness through free choice.

This study bridges these gaps by analysing how social media influence happiness and anxiety through the lens of existential philosophy, with a focus on the mediating effects of basic psychological needs. By synthesising SDT with existential concepts like Sartre's 'freedom-responsibility paradox' and Heidegger's (1996) 'authenticity-alienation tension', this work offers a nuanced understanding of the dual psychological impacts of social media.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Media Behaviour Under the Existential Philosophy Theoretical Framework

According to the 49th Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China, as of December 2021, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.032 billion, and the Internet penetration rate reached 73.0%. The popularisation of the Internet has led to the emergence and development of social media.

In existentialist philosophy, the individual is inherently free, yet this freedom is often accompanied by a heavy burden of anxiety and responsibility (Sartre 1943). The use of social media makes individuals face more significant decision-making pressure while enjoying more freedom, and even produces anxiety about the gap between 'ideal self' and 'real self' (Hîncu, Baghiu 2023). In terms of the influence of social media on individual happiness, some scholars believe that social media plays an inhibitory role in the generation of individual happiness. Dai et al. (2022) revealed that the psychological effects of passive social media use on adolescents are mainly cognitive, emotional, and impede the generation of subjective well-being. Chen et al. (2021) concluded that social media self-control failure negatively affects the subjective well-being of master's degree students, and the negative effect on time efficacy is more significant. Another group of scholars believes that social media can positively contribute to an individual's subjective well-being (Park 2021; Ostic et al. 2021; Hardman, Bazarova 2021).

Based on Sartre's core proposition that 'existence precedes essence', this study conceptualises social media as a practice space for the individual's *pour-soi* (being-for-itself), where users express free will through proactively content selection. In Camus's philosophy of the Absurd, sustained social media engagement is interpreted as a revolt against the absurd

world, endowing existence with meaning through action. Users actualise *pour-soi* freedom via creative activities such as posting updates and designing personal profiles, which inherently constitute the existential foundation of happiness – a perspective aligned with Sartre's dictum 'existence precedes essence' that posits social media as offering infinite possibilities for self-construction (Diržytė, Kačerauskas 2021). Within this context, likes and comments serve as positive feedback for the Other's gaze, temporarily alleviating existential solitude. Thus, social media use becomes a form of resistance against the absurd, as users transform fragmented experiences into meaningful narratives through life documentation and topic engagement. This theoretical synthesis demonstrates that social media use positively promotes individual happiness.

However, from the existentialist perspective, social media may intensify feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Especially when fixated on the 'gaze of others', individuals may experience a loss of self-worth, leading to heightened anxiety. Scholarly analyses of social media's impact on anxiety predominantly highlight its positive correlation with anxiety. Pittman and Reich (2016) argued that social media can induce individual loneliness, thereby causing anxiety. Some scholars have also put forward a new viewpoint on the use of social media by individuals, which suggests that the more individuals are exposed to focused social media, the lower the probability of anxiety generation, while the more individuals are exposed to unconscious social media, the higher the probability of anxiety generation (Luo 2022). Weak-tie socialisation on social platforms alleviates interaction anxiety in virtual networks but does not mitigate real-life social anxiety (Fan 2020). Integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with existential needs theory, autonomy needs correspond to Sartre's *pour-soi* (being for it-self), while competence needs to align with Kierkegaard's leap of faith. An ideological critique of algorithmic systems exposes how they insidiously strip users of autonomy, engendering Heideggerian *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness). Mechanical scrolling behaviours satisfy pseudo-needs (e.g. instant gratification) that paradoxically exacerbate profound anxiety.

The results indicate that social media influences individual psychology, especially well-being and anxiety. In summary, users manifest free will through content production (e.g. original posts) and symbolic interaction (e.g. likes and comments) – a proactive self-construction process that resonates with Heidegger's notion of 'being-toward-death' as an authentic state of existence. Social media engagement exhibits dual existential modalities. On the one hand, users practice Sartrean freedom by autonomously curating content (e.g. following specific topics), with such creative acts forming the ontological foundation of happiness. On the other hand, the 'information cocoon' effect of algorithmic recommendations validates Sartre's assertion that 'hell is other people'. When users conform to the expectations of others, they descend into Heideggerian *Verfallen* (fallenness), an inauthentic state that precipitates existential anxiety.

Phenomenological Integrated Model of Basic Psychological Needs

Basic psychological needs theory summarises three basic psychological needs determining human behaviour based on drive theory and achievement motivation theory: autonomy needs, competence needs and attribution needs (Yu 2018). Vansteenkiste (2013) posited that these basic psychological needs are linked to the survival and development of human beings, and when these needs are satisfied, it helps to develop positive and optimistic psychological qualities of the individual and enhances the sense of well-being, while when these needs are not satisfied, the individual will have negative experiences, and psychological disorders and

somatic diseases will come at any time. It can be seen that the fulfillment of basic psychological needs has an impact on individual well-being and the generation of individual anxiety.

By integrating the three dimensions of basic psychological needs from the Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, relatedness) with existentialist philosophy, we derive the following theoretical synthesis: (1) Autonomy corresponds to Sartre's notion of 'being-for-itself' (*être-pour-soi*), manifested in users' control over content creation (e.g. original content ratio); (2) Competence maps onto Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith', reflected in users' existential validation through skill demonstration (e.g. photography portfolios); (3) Relatedness aligns with Heidegger's concept of 'being-with' (*Mitsein*), realised through deep interactions within interest-based communities (e.g. academic groups). This theoretical framework reveals the dual effects of social media engagement: When users participate in interest-driven communities, they not only fulfill competence needs (via skill expression) but also achieve relatedness (through group identity), embodying Sartre's 'positive freedom'. Conversely, algorithm-driven passive scrolling may induce need alienation, trapping users in Heidegger's 'the they' (*das Man*) state – mechanically swiping through content while experiencing existential emptiness.

Existential Tension in Digital Contexts

For different subjects, the basic psychological needs to meet the needs of different orientations. Different groups prioritise distinct psychological needs: for students, the use of various types of social media cannot only enrich the spiritual world to a large extent but also meet the needs of learning (Di 2020), social media provide a wealth of knowledge and information resources, students can use social media to obtain learning materials, participate in academic discussions and interest groups, to enrich their spirit world students can leverage social media to access learning materials, join academic discussions and participate in interest groups, enriching their intellectual landscape. Educational platforms, online courses and learning communities on social media can meet students' learning needs and enable them to acquire knowledge and skills more efficiently. For office workers, the autonomous and active use of social media is positively correlated with the fulfillment of individual psychological needs due to the needs of work, and also positively correlated with individual intrinsic work motivation (Qin 2021), the positive use of social media for career development and work-related communication can enhance office workers' work motivation and psychological satisfaction. This use is associated with an individual's intrinsic motivation and helps to increase work efficiency and career satisfaction.

Drawing on Sartre's concept of 'freedom in situation', this study constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework for social media engagement:

The structural constraints, platform rules and algorithmic mechanisms extend Heidegger's notion of 'ready-to-hand' into the digital realm, shaping user behaviours through invisible technical infrastructures. From the agentic praxis, users enact 'projection' (*Entwurf*) through creative content production, where such free practices may either alleviate or amplify existential anxiety, contingent on their alignment with authentic self-expression. Finally, from the interactional alienation, quantitative metrics (likes, followers) institutionalise a new 'gaze' mechanism, entrapping users in Sartrean 'being-seen/seeing' cycles – performing identities for algorithmic validation while paradoxically losing agency.

This framework demonstrates a dual dynamic: While users expand existential possibilities by transcending spatiotemporal constraints, they are simultaneously re-disciplined by

algorithmic systems. The resultant existential tension manifests as active creation may fulfill autonomy needs and confirm existential significance through meaningful self-objectification, but at the same time, over-reliance on virtual validation (e.g. follower counts) risks Heideggerian 'falling' (Verfallen), where users become ungrounded in the pursuit of digital signifiers, trapped in 'they-self' conformity.

Sartre's concept of 'freedom in situation' can be analysed within the context of social media's formatted content. Social media provides users with limited options (such as templated content forms), yet users exercise free will within these constrained environments (e.g. choosing posting times and image styles). When combined with Heidegger's *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand), social media use reveals a dual potential: users may instrumentalise social media for practical ends (e.g. work communication), which could either facilitate authentic need satisfaction or lead to alienation. While social media offers creative freedom (e.g. customising content), algorithmic recommendations may implicitly restrict choices – a phenomenon that aligns with Sartre's 'freedom in situation', where freedom is exercised within structurally limited possibilities (Fang 2010).

Phenomenological Deconstruction of Mediating Mechanisms

Based on the foregoing, if social media can fulfill the basic psychological needs of an individual, the individual's sense of well-being significantly increases. This positive psychological state helps both men and women better face life challenges, enhancing self-efficacy and life satisfaction (often more pronounced in women), and vice versa (Kačerauskas, Valantinaitė 2023). Thus, basic psychological needs mediate the relationship between social media and individual psychological states. This study explores the effects of social media on individuals' well-being and anxiety, as well as the mediating effects and pathways of basic psychological needs.

From an existentialist perspective, this study employs Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body to frame basic psychological needs as embodied mediators between social media use and psychological states (Liu 2023). When users satisfy autonomy needs through self-directed content creation, this 'bodily intentionality' reinforces Sartrean 'existence precedes essence', fostering self-affirmation and enhancing well-being. Conversely, algorithm-driven passive scrolling triggers an alienation of the 'body schema' (*schéma corporel*), where users experience Heideggerian ruptures of 'ready-to-hand' (*Zuhandenheit*) amid information overload, generating existential anxiety. Meanwhile, deep interactions in interest-based communities satisfy relatedness needs through 'being-with' (*Mitsein*) experiences, forming Merleau-Pontian 'intersubjective' bonds that alleviate loneliness. The analysis reveals a critical duality: short-term gratification (e.g. instant likes creating illusory competence) may obscure long-term alienation risks embedded in platform logics. True existential fulfillment (e.g. self-actualisation) ultimately depends on authentic praxis – sustained engagement aligned with one's 'lived experience' (*le vécu*), transcending algorithmic quantification to reclaim existential agency. This framework underscores how digital practices simultaneously extend and constrain human existence, mediated by the dialectic of embodied needs and techno-social infrastructures.

The bidirectional influence of *Mitsein* (being-with) reveals that relatedness satisfaction may either foster authentic coexistence (e.g. profound discussions) or devolve into conformity with 'das Man' (the They) (e.g. mindless trends), with the mediating effect contingent on interaction quality. When social media use exacerbates the deprivation of autonomy (e.g. information cocoons), unmet needs directly induce existential anxiety, akin to Heidegger's

Angst (dread) in 'being-toward-death'. Unfulfilled competence needs may plunge users into 'existential depression' (e.g. self-negation from comparing achievements with others), aligning with Sartre's analysis of 'lack-based anxiety'. The absence of relatedness intensifies feelings of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) (e.g. social exclusion) and reinforces Heidegger's *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness).

Moreover, the mediating role of basic psychological needs operates along a temporal dimension – short-term satisfaction may obscure long-term risks of alienation (e.g. instant gratification from likes undermining deeper meaning).

A Philosophical Reflection About Social Media as a Technological Being: The Essence of Social Media From a Heideggerian Philosophical Perspective

In the Question Concerning Technology, Heidegger posits that the essence of modern technology lies in 'Gestell' (Enframing) – a coercive framework that reduces the world to manipulable resources. Social media, as a paradigmatic technological form in the digital age, concretises Gestell through its algorithmic mechanisms and data logic: users are simplified into data nodes, interactions are quantified as metrics (e.g. likes and followers), and existential experiences are compressed into predictable traffic models. This technological rationality not only obscures the authenticity of Being but also reinforces cognitive limitations through 'filter bubbles', reducing free choice to the passive acceptance by algorithmic curation. Within this framework, social media's purported 'convenience' masks a latent alienation – users gradually lose autonomous exploration of existential meaning while perceiving themselves as technologically empowered.

Digital Redemption: Existentialist Pathways of Resistance

Despite its alienation risks, social media's technical affordances also enable possibilities for existentialist redemption. Camusian philosophy of 'revolt' suggests that users can carve out spaces of freedom within algorithmic hegemony through creative practices (e.g. original content creation, critical discourse), transforming social media into a tool for 'rebellious against the absurd' (Ganesh, Moss 2022). For instance, deep interactions in niche communities may actualise Heideggerian 'authentic being-with' (*authentisches Mitsein*), transcending the mediocrity of the 'they' (*das Man*) through intellectual collisions. Meanwhile, conscious resistance – such as limiting usage time or rejecting data surveillance – constitutes a deliberate pushback against technological Gestell. This dialectical view reveals that social media's ontological significance is not predetermined but contingent on how individuals exercise freedom and responsibility within technological constraints.

Technology, Embodiment, and Existential Experience: A Phenomenological Nexus

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment posits technology as an extension of the body, framing media engagement as embodied existential praxis (Liu 2023). Actions like 'swiping screens' or 'double-tapping to like' on social media are not merely physical gestures but manifestations of 'bodily intentionality' – users establish meaning through tactile interactions with digital interfaces. When such behaviours degrade into mechanical repetition (e.g. mindless scrolling), the body becomes an object of algorithmic manipulation, fragmenting existential experience into 'ready-to-hand' (*Zuhandenheit*) operations. Conversely, when users channel bodily perceptions (e.g. photography and writing) into creative expression, they

actualise Heidegger's notion of 'poetic dwelling', restoring technology to its primordial role as the 'house of Being'. This interplay highlights how digital interfaces simultaneously mediate and disrupt the unity of embodied existence.

DISCUSSION

Studies have shown that social media has a strong association with individual happiness and anxiety. This is consistent with the results of previous studies (Park 2021; Ostic et al. 2021; Hardman, Bazarova 2021). Individuals are influenced by the social environment, focusing on self-identity construction; social platforms serve as key channels for self-presentation, and positive feedback can contribute to the generation of subjective well-being (Pang 2022). In addition, in an individual's daily life and learning, there is often a highly aware behaviour of others' lives due to the fear of missing out, the high concern about others' lives and learning routine, the fear of missing the key information, and interesting experiences. In such cases, social media use can significantly alleviate anxiety (Luo 2022).

This indicates that rational social media use is closely linked to well-being and anxiety, positively influencing well-being while mitigating anxiety.

Mediational analysis further revealed that social media indirectly predicts individual happiness by influencing basic psychological needs. Whether the basic psychological needs of middle and high school students are satisfied largely depends on whether the learning goals are achieved, and when the goals are accomplished or exceeded, students will have a subjective sense of well-being (Liu 2018), and the same is true for adults when the work performance or life status reaches the ideal state. Some companies encourage employees to use social media to improve job satisfaction through communication with others and to satisfy their self-needs and competence needs (Longobardi et al. 2020). Thus, basic psychological needs mediate the effect of social media on individual happiness, serving as a bridge between social media and psychological states.

The study proved that basic psychological needs did not significantly mediate the relationship between social media and individual anxiety, which is a new finding in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the interrelations among social media, individual well-being, anxiety, and basic psychological needs, as well as the mediating role of basic psychological needs from an existentialist perspective. The key conclusions include the following: Social media use positively promotes individual happiness, while passive or problematic use exacerbates anxiety. Basic psychological needs do not significantly mediate the relationship between social media and individual anxiety.

Future research should explore how different levels of social media use impact these outcomes, with a focus on subdividing and exploring the three needs – autonomy, competence and relatedness – in depth.

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Socialinių medijų įtaka asmeninei laimei ir nerimui egzistencinės filosofijos požiūriu: psichologinių poreikių mediacinis poveikis

Santrauka

Socialinės medijos yra glaudžiai susijusios su žmonių kasdieniu gyvenimu ir studijomis, subtiliai veikia jų psichologiją. Siekiant ištirti socialinių medijų poveikį asmeninei laimei ir nerimui, šiame darbe taikoma egzistencinės filosofijos analizė. Siekiama peržengti pozityvizmo apribojimus, dekonstruojant „laisvės ir atsakomybės paradoksą“ ir „autentiškumo ir susvetimėjimo įtampą“, būdingus socialinei žiniasklaidai. Tyrimo rezultatai leidžia daryti tris pagrindines išvadas: 1) socialinių medijų naudojimas reikšmingai padidina individualią laimę; 2) socialinių medijų naudojimas sumažina nerimo lygį; 3) pagrindiniai psichologiniai poreikiai veikia kaip tarpininkai tarp socialinių medijų naudojimo ir asmeninės laimės. Daroma prielaida, kad racionalus socialinių medijų naudojimas ir gebėjimas atpažinti jų teigiamą bei neigiamą poveikį gali padėti palaikyti psichologinę gerovę.

Raktažodžiai: egzistencinė filosofija, socialinės medijos, laimė, nerimas, pagrindiniai psichologiniai poreikiai, mediacinis poveikis