

The Influence of Social Media on User's Emotional Regulation Mechanism

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Abstract:

The popularization of social media has made it have more impact on the public, including feedback, but also brings people problems, such as anxiety and polarization of views. This review analyzes the double influence of social media on the emotional regulation mechanism, based on the theory of emotional regulation, the theory of use and satisfying, and social comparative theory. Social media can strengthen users' positive emotions through providing social support, channels for emotional catharsis, and illustrating comments with positive impacts, but can also lead to problems like the accumulation and diffusion of negative emotions due to its information cocoon bondage, comparison of upward society, and information overload, etc. For these problems, this review provides users, social media, all sectors such as schools and families and with suggestions on optimization.: the users should proactively manage the content they are exposed to, and balance online and offline interaction; the social platform ought to improve the algorithm ethics and provide users with a healthy use path; schools and parents need to strengthen the cultivation of children's digital literacy, and the organizations are suggested to propagandize knowledge that is relevant to emotional regulation in order to improve the public's emotional coping abilities. This research provides theoretical support and practical methods to promote the healthy use of social media.

Keywords: Social media; emotional regulation; social comparison; digital literacy.

1. Introduction

People are now in a society that is highly mediated. With the rapid development of internet technology, social media represented by Redbook, TikTok, Weibo, and other software are becoming more and more

popular. Social media have penetrated into all aspects of people's daily life, reshaping their emotional cognition and emotional experience and have already become a necessary platform to express feelings and adjust emotions. According to the newest report, as of June 30, 2025, the number of consolidated month-

ly active accounts of WeChat has reached 1.411 billion; by 2025, TikTok has become a huge platform with 1.59 billion monthly active users. People browse their mobile phones to kill time, seek for resonance unconsciously, which is essentially because users use social media as a tool to regulate their emotions. However, this convenient emotional adjustment tool is also a “double-edged sword”: on the one hand, TikTok’s information flow, Weibo’s real-time hot search, Redbook’s daily life sharing and other immediate, interactive and personalized functions can provide users with emotional catharsis channels, bringing large amounts of pleasant experience, especially for vulnerable or marginal groups. On the other hand, there are also some people who fall into negative emotions like anxiety and low self-esteem and cannot extricate themselves because they compare their own life with “perfect lifestyle” others post on the Internet. As a result, their inherent healthy emotional regulation abilities are destroyed. According to this two-way influence of social media on emotions, the importance of regulating emotions actively and correctly is becoming more and more prominent. First and foremost, emotional regulation is a “protector” of an individual’s mental health. It happens during all the steps of emotional generation, happiness and satisfaction can be improved by managing the emotions properly rather than controlling them [1]. In addition, it is also a “social lubricant”. Effective interpersonal emotional regulation is beneficial to maintaining high-quality social relations, enhancing social ties, resolving conflicts and promoting collaboration [2]. Therefore, the systematic exploration of this influence mechanism is related to the digital well-being and emotional health of millions of users. Psychological research shows that individuals regulate their emotions through upward and downward comparison with other users on social media and conduct selective self-presentation after judging their own relevant aspects, which has effects on their mental health [3]. Nevertheless, its intrinsic mechanism has not yet formed a systematic theoretical framework [4-6].

In-depth study of the influence of mechanism on emotional regulation has necessary theoretical and practical values. Theoretically, this essay uses emotional regulation theory, use and satisfaction theory, and social comparison theory as a theoretical framework, integrates and analyzes how users can conduct emotional regulation via content selection, social interaction, etc., in-depth analyzes both positive and negative impacts of social media on users’ emotional regulation mechanism, roundly present how social platforms play a vital role in emotional adjustment, providing a basis for the expansion of emotional regulation theory in the digital era. Practically, based on the diagnosis of the problems, this research provides users

with targeted and acceptable suggestions for people to use social platforms healthily and promote platforms to better empower users’ emotions by clarifying the positive and negative influence of social media on their sentiments. This review can enable the public to have a better understanding of the dual influences of social media on their inner emotions and better grasp the health and stability in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

The theory of emotional regulation was proposed by James Gross in 1998. He was the first one to construct emotional adjustment systematically and theoretically. He insists that emotional regulation is a continuous and active process, and he puts up the classic model of the emotional regulation process. This model defined the regulation of emotions—a process by which individuals adjust and control the occurrence, experience and expression of their moods. This process is divided into five steps, they are—situation selection, situation correction, attention distribution, cognitive re-evaluation and reaction adjustment. The mechanism of users’ emotional adjustment on social platforms is the same as this. The users positively guide their emotions through contacting with positive contents selectively, avoiding negative contents or diverting attention in the adjustment stage of first-focusing (situation selection, situation correction, attention distribution, cognitive re-evaluation), and this behavior can boost emotional health; in the reaction regulation stage, users consciously suppress the external manifestation like facial expressions, language, body movements. In order to adjust their mood, which may increase their physical pressure [7].

The theory of use and satisfaction was first proposed by Elihu Katz in 1959, and was systematized by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1973. The core point of this theory is that as the users of social media, the public can automatically choose the content to browse according to their personal requirements, and gain satisfaction through the media. In addition, this process is formed by emotional needs and platform characteristics together. Users generate different kinds of emotional requirements such as mediating negative feelings, looking for positive emotional values or seeking resonance, and choosing relevant social platforms according to these requirements. Moreover, the platform characteristics play a regulating role—different platforms can directly affect the results of using social media. For instance, Weibo focuses on the obtainment of open information, the hot search is updated every minute, so that users can immediately gain the hot news. By contrast, WeChat mainly focuses on establishing closed relationships, the WeChat moments are mostly open to

friends, and users can achieve a sense of self-worth recognition and accumulate social capital by receiving likes and comments on their posts.

Social comparative theory was proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954. He believes that when individuals lack objective standards, they will regard others as a reference point for comparison to understand and evaluate themselves. There are three types of social comparison--upward comparisons, downward comparisons, and parallel comparisons. Besides, social media can exaggerate this phenomenon of social comparison. Research shows that, when users are skimming through the glamorous life sharing that are posted by Internet celebrities who have attractive appearances and good figures on social platforms, and making upward comparisons between their own lives and those of these "superior" individuals, are prone to cause negative emotions like anxiety and self-abasement. Vice versa, when users browse posts such as ordinary people confiding their difficulties, they tend to make downward comparisons, which can help them get psychological comfort [8].

3. The Impacts of Social Media on Users' Emotional Regulation

3.1 Positive Impacts

With the emergence of social media, users' emotional regulation system is provided with a powerful tool--it can offer emotional support and catharsis channel, which can efficiently relieve stress and provide positive emotional value. One of the manifestations of these positive effects is that it helps users establish an emotional connection and get social support from empathetic feedback. According to the theory of use and satisfaction, humans have strong emotional requirements such as looking for resonance. And social media can perfectly meet these needs. For example, when the user is in a depressed and lost mood, by posting emotional posts, they can get immediate and positive response from friends' likes, comments, and private chats, perceiving social support and relieving loneliness, disappointment, or anxiety. Besides, when users see other people's experiences or thoughts that are similar to theirs, they will generate understanding and sympathy like "I've experienced this kind of thing before!" or "I think so too!", gaining a strong sense of belonging, considering "I'm not the only one like this.". In that way, their restlessness and sense of alienation can be greatly relieved. Another positive effect of social media is also reflected in its emotional catharsis function. Users can express feelings and release stress by browsing emotional short videos

like ASMR videos or joining the anonymous tree hole-like communities. Here, they do not have to carry out the "expression suppression" stage in the emotional regulation process. Research shows that, compared to pouring out face to face, posting text or videos can break through users' psychological line of defense more efficiently, avoiding concerns about being embarrassed in reality, so as to help users truly express themselves, which is conducive to maintaining long-term mental health.

Apart from owning functions of providing emotional support and catharsis channel, social media can also enhance users' positive emotions and self-identification. Humans are born with an inherent need for self-verification, while social media happens to offer people immediate positive feedback, which is effective to help users confirm their self-worth. Users share their achievements, travel, food, and other content that constitute a wonderful life. It triggers the brain's reward circuit and releases dopamine when they receive others' likes or positive comments, which strengthens the pleasure and satisfaction of being recognized. In addition, joining communities like interest groups and learning groups can encourage users to obtain positive emotional resonance through empathy and mutual assistance. Furthermore, this can relieve loneliness and improve emotional stability. Take fans on Weibo and marginal populations as examples. Fans celebrate their idols' birthdays collectively on Weibo Super Talk, gaining pleasure through releasing common emotions; some marginalized groups in mainstream society like patients with rare diseases join mutual support groups, sharing treating experiences, receiving resonance and understanding, and giving support to each other. This strong sense of belonging is one of the most stable positive emotional resources, which can vastly mitigate the pressure from other negative emotions.

3.2 Negative Impacts

As a "double edged sword", social media also brings negative impacts by the time it provides users with positive adjustments like emotional value [9]. It mainly embodies two aspects--exacerbating emotional imbalance and the accumulation of negative emotions, as well as the polarization and uncontrollability of group emotions. The anxiety of social comparison, information overload and emotional fatigue can all lead to emotional disorder and accumulate negative emotion. According to the theory of social comparison, when users are contacting others' "high moments" frequently, they will be easily carrying out upward social comparison, generating jealousy and psychologically imbalanced feelings and engaging in self-deprecation, such as "my life is not as colorful and

wonderful as others”, immense in inferiority and powerlessness, so as to give themselves up as hopeless. For instance, the perfect bodies of Internet celebrities under various kinds of filters and beauty enhancement functions define the standards of mainstream aesthetics, which can easily irritate users to become unsatisfied and ashamed if they frequently view these kinds of content. Besides, since social media constantly pushes high arousal content, users’ empathy will go numb under the endless stimulation, leading to compassion fatigue. For example, after “being bombed” by negative information like disaster reports and news about social conflicts, users will feel an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, nothing to do but only watch. As time passes, they will become more and more pessimistic about society and find it hard to regulate this depression by themselves. On the other hand, algorithmic recommendations will intensify emotional content of a kind. Indignation, fear, and moral outrage are especially infectious, triggering collective emotions. Therefore, the process of “anger” converting into “more anger” will be repeated again and again, causing a further intensification of emotions aggravated by the seditious expressions from other users or accounts. The emotional trend following under hot search events on Weibo can best explain this. Individuals’ independent thinking abilities are replaced by a single type of emotion; users are no longer regulating their emotions but continuously applying and intensifying them. In addition, many social media have been providing a more or less anonymous social environment. Some users believe that they don’t need to undertake the due obligations for their behaviors and words when communicating in such an anonymous environment, which makes it easier to lower their responsibility and self-restraint. Although it seems like a kind of “freedom”, it inherently breaks individuals’ self-moral restraint, causing them more prone to emotional outbursts, triggering online scolding wars and messing up their own emotional balance [10].

4. Optimization Path and Countermeasures Suggestions

In order to use social media healthily, users, platforms and all sectors of society ought to consciously optimize the use of it. From the perspective of users, they can carry out autonomous optimization from two aspects--autonomously manage the content they access and balance online and offline interaction. First of all, for the sake of managing content, users can browse high-quality works that express diverse standpoints regularly, thereby breaking free from the constraints of the “information cocoon”. By cancelling the attention of bloggers who are prone to cause anxiety

and emotional depletion, users can convert themselves from an “information receiver” into a “controller”. Secondly, balancing online and offline interactions requires users to manage their time spent on social media, actively extending the connections established online to the offline world, focusing on building interpersonal relationships in reality, and avoiding excessively relying on virtual feedback. The theory of attention recovery shows that, after disconnecting from social media, intimate interactions like accomplishment and in-depth chatting can help spirits get recovered naturally, increasing the stability of emotions.

As for social platforms, they need to improve the ethical standards of algorithm recommendations and reduce the frequency of recommending contents that contain simple or extreme emotions to avoid exacerbating users’ negative feelings. Moreover, it is also beneficial to add psychological consultation resources under topics that are conveying anxiety and depression, and guide users to actively take the initiative to cure themselves. Providing healthy tools can also help regulate their emotions. An “emotional mode” can be set up, for instance, the “concentration mode” enables users to block the push of non-emergency and unnecessary social messages such as likes or the updates on Wechat moments, which can relieve the distraction caused by the “passive screen-filling”, and pay more attention to self-improvement like reading more books.

The optimized path on the social level can be discussed from two aspects: schools and parents, as well as media and institutions. From the perspective of schools and parents, schools should set up courses on emotional education in the digital era, teaching children to understand the “idealized presentation” of social media correctly. At the same time, parents suggested cultivating kids’ offline emotional regulation abilities. For instance, they can teach their children how to release pressure and anxiety through doing sports and communication. On the other hand, the media and institutions ought to carry out publicity on digital literacy, helping the public comprehend the mechanism of emotional regulation. For example, the Health Commission and the platform jointly released the “User Digital Health Regulation Guide”, providing users with information on how to recognize the signals when emotions are at the largest capacity.

5. Conclusion

This essay analyzes the double influence of social media on users’ emotions as an essential adjustment tool in people’s daily life based on the theory of emotional regulation, the theory of use and satisfaction, and the social comparison theory. On the one hand, it enhances users’ happiness through offering catharsis channels, helping

strengthen positive emotions and self-identification. In addition, a variety of communities also provide emotional values like resonance which can enhance users' sense of belonging while enriching their lives and helping them maintain positive emotions; on the other hand, today's social media tend to give priority to pushing and amplifying emotional contents for the sake of attracting flow, causing users to accept large amounts of emotional information passively, and having difficulties distinguishing their real demands and traffic push. This can easily lead to the exacerbation of emotional disorders and accumulation of negative emotions, cause emotional intensification and behaviors out of control, interrupting users' emotional regulation mechanism and their daily life. Social media can actually amplify people's emotions, and users lack the tools to help them recognize timely and accurately. However, this contradiction can be relieved through users actively accessing diverse viewpoints, consciously avoiding excessive reliance on virtual communications, platforms setting up "emotional mode" and reducing pushing negative contents to assist in regulating emotions, as well as schools and parents focusing on children's education of digital literacy and related institutions raising public awareness of actively adjusting emotions. Future research can further explore how artificial intelligence on social platforms affect the accuracy of users' emotional regulation and carry out cross-cultural comparisons of differences in users' emotional adjustments between social media in different social backgrounds. Overall, to optimize the influences of social media on users' mechanism of emotional regulation, it requires the cooperation of users, platforms, and all sectors of society, empowering users' emotions and reducing the threats of negative emotions.

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