

Review

Scholarship on well-being and social media: A sociotechnical perspective

Nicole B. Ellison¹, Cassidy Pyle¹ and Jessica Vitak²

Abstract

Evaluating the well-being implications of social media use is challenging for many reasons, including finding appropriate theoretical and methodological approaches that do not exclusively center either the technology (and its structural features) or the user (and their motivations, psychological disposition, etc.). We argue that many research questions would benefit from a more integrated approach that fully acknowledges both these elements and their mutually constitutive relationship to one another. This essay highlights the possibilities presented by one intellectual tradition that acknowledges how the materiality of an artifact intertwines with social factors and allows us to better understand how technology and people mutually shape one another: the *sociotechnical perspective*. We describe three broad domains—self-presentation, social capital, and social support—that are relevant to one's well-being and are especially well-aligned with this approach.

Addresses

¹ University of Michigan School of Information, 105 S State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285, USA

² University of Maryland College of Information Studies, 4130 Campus Drive, College Park, MD 20742, USA

Corresponding author: Ellison, Nicole B (enicole@umich.edu)

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Introduction

The introduction of new technologies is historically accompanied by scholarly and popular discussions about their implications for our well-being, interpersonal relationships, and society broadly. Social media are no different. For nearly two decades, researchers have speculated, debated, analyzed, concluded, and then

speculated again about the consequences and causes of social media use with regard to individual well-being. Explicating the empirical relationship between well-being and social media use is challenging. In addition to well-known research issues like self-report bias [1–3], both *social media use* and *well-being* are complex phenomena marked by evolving understandings, tensions, and measurement challenges. Although most meta-reviews and umbrella reviews [e.g., Refs. [4–6]] find very small negative effects—if they identify a relationship at all—communal anxieties about the relationship between well-being and social media use will likely persist. This article describes one approach for conceptualizing the role of technology in social contexts and, by extension, the relationship between technology use and well-being.

In recent years, scholarship exploring the relationship between technology and well-being has conceptualized social media use in multiple ways. Some papers aggregate social media use, operationalizing *intense social media use* as time spent on platforms (e.g., Ref. [7]). In fact, a recent scoping review found that 56% of reviewed studies measured social media use in terms of frequency and duration of use [8]. Other work has shifted toward more granular usage measures such as the active-passive dichotomy [9]; this work generally suggests that active users experience well-being benefits while passive users experience negative well-being outcomes. Critiques of this approach include work that notes there are significant individual differences even among use types [10,11] and that active clicking is not the only—or even most productive—way to signal attention to social ties on the platform [12]. Finally, some studies consider psychological processes associated with social media interactions, including self-disclosure [13] and social comparison [14]. While these studies advance our understanding by examining important factors such as individuals' personality traits, to date studies in the psychological domain have engaged in a less nuanced way with specific user practices or platform-specific affordances.

Social media research is flourishing across many disciplines, raising an additional challenge for research in this space. Researchers often have deep expertise in one discipline (e.g., computer science or psychology) but may neglect other perspectives that would be informative. For instance, researchers examining the

relationship between psychological variables and social media use may be constrained by factors such as their own training and collaboration networks. Thus, they may focus exclusively on either psychological variables, thus treating all technologies as a “black box” [15] and all user practices as interchangeable. Alternatively, they may have access to granular social media trace data that enables them to describe user practices in detail but offer no linkages to established psychological variables and mechanisms. We believe that studies that attend to both dimensions—the user and the technology—in nuanced and sophisticated ways constitute a productive approach for future scholarship, and we point to sociotechnical approaches as one pathway for doing so.

The sociotechnical perspective

The *sociotechnical perspective* provides a helpful framework for scholars who seek to explicate the relationship between social media use and well-being. This perspective has a long history spanning multiple academic communities. These include Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars, who often make purposeful efforts to consider how the social and technological mutually constitute each other through frameworks such as social shaping [16] and actor-network theory [17,18], as well as scholars in information systems [19], social informatics [20], and other intellectual communities.

Sociotechnical approaches view all technologies as socially situated and build on the assumption that the technological and the social mutually constitute one another. They acknowledge the “interdependent and inextricably linked relationships among the features of any technological object or system and the social norms, rules of use, and participation by a broad range of human stakeholders” [19]. In doing so, sociotechnical frameworks directly and simultaneously engage with *both* social/psychological phenomena and the materiality of a technological artifact. By materiality, we mean “the ways that [a technology’s] physical and/or digital materials are arranged into particular forms that endure across differences in place and time” [21]. In simple terms, this approach acknowledges *that humans have agency but technology matters*.

Attending to the social context that shapes technology’s design and use is a key component of this perspective [20]. For instance, drawing on Giddens’ [22] work on structuration, Wanda Orlikowski emphasizes the importance of understanding technological artifacts as both “objective reality and as socially constructed product” [23]. A more contemporary framework that captures this idea is the affordances approach. Affordances describe possibilities for action that emerge in the interplay between a human actor and the materiality

of a technology, wherein “the materiality of technology influences, but does not determine, the possibilities for users” [20]. Examples of affordances include portability, persistence, and visibility [25,26].

Building upon this work, sociotechnical perspectives have been widely embraced by information science (iSchool) scholars, whose work exists at the intersection of multiple disciplines ranging from psychology and communication to computer science and human–computer interaction (HCI). We believe related disciplines could leverage this approach when exploring the social and psychological elements of technology use, as it highlights how an artifact’s materiality intertwines with sociality to produce unique outcomes. Moreover, implementing a sociotechnical approach encourages scholarship that better speaks to the enduring mechanisms behind empirical observations and can adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of communication technology platforms and practices. Returning to affordances as an example of a sociotechnical perspective, researchers that center their analyses around technology affordances [24,27] as opposed to specific features or platforms may produce work that is still relevant even when features and platforms change over time [28].

The sociotechnical perspective in action: context collapse & “Finstas”

Context collapse is one example of a construct that is best theorized through a sociotechnical lens. The term describes the challenges that accompany activities in which distinct—and sometimes contradictory—audiences are merged, especially salient in instances when self-presentational goals are not consonant [29,30]. In offline settings, these instances are rare. Weddings are a canonical example of context collapse that is often stressful for protagonists, who must manage the merging of individuals representing distinct social networks from across their lifespan. On social media, users experience a more mundane version of this when they craft a status update that will be visible to different subsets of their audience. Context collapse may be one reason why many users eschew these broadcasted updates, or if they do share, do so in strategic ways that capitalize on both technical and social aspects of platform dynamics. For example, Vitak and Kim [31] found that some Facebook users employ network regulation strategies by limiting who they connect with in order to control access to their disclosures while others engage in content regulation strategies, including more careful construction of posts that only some viewers would understand. Other work explores how users manage their visibility to diverse audiences by refraining from visible clicks on the platform itself, instead opting to communicate via other channels such as phone calls [12].

A sociotechnical perspective also emphasizes how different users may navigate the same platform very differently to achieve self-presentational goals. For instance, some Instagram users maintain two profiles on the platform: a “Rinsta,” which reflects a more public-facing and highly curated version of the self (akin to Goffman’s front stage performance), and a “Finsta,” a more private, “backstage” safe space to vent and share funny or unflattering pictures with close friends [32–35]. Research also suggests that users vary in their perceptions of the extent to which platforms support relevant self-presentational affordances such as presentation flexibility, audience transparency, and content persistence [36].

In the following sections, we describe three scholarly domains—self-presentation, social capital, and social support—and explore what a sociotechnical perspective would offer in terms of increased understanding and theoretical contribution. These domains have been directly linked to well-being in the online context [37–39] and remain vibrant and vital research foci.

Sociotechnical perspectives on social media and well-being across domains

Self-presentation on and across online platforms

Self-presentation speaks to how we “perform” differently to different audiences in order to manage others’ impressions [40]. While this core insight remains salient today, nuances of self-presentation require re-examination in the social media age. For instance, when Goffman developed the dramaturgical approach, audiences and “performers” were typically co-located in space and time, like the theatrical performances the perspective leverages as a key analytic construct. On social media platforms, however, users must contend with the challenges of crafting geographically and temporally distributed performances, impression formation practices that cannot be tailored on the fly to visible others, and potentially ego-threatening commentary from their network [41–45].

Social media platforms vary significantly in ways that have implications for self-presentation and, by extension, well-being. A prime example of this is content persistence, which varies across and within platforms. For instance, users’ posts on Facebook likely differ from more ephemeral platforms like Snapchat, where content typically disappears after some time [46,47]. Platforms have experimented with different levels of ephemerality, ranging from Instagram’s Stories, which allow users to share content for 24 hours [48], to WeChat’s Time Limit setting, which makes content “private” after a specified period of time [49]. Research that treats technology use as either present or not, without distinguishing between specific user practices and platform affordances (e.g., privacy settings or the

persistence of any shared content) or the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal-level factors motivating users to share, will be ill-equipped to interrogate important aspects of self-presentation and the decision to share—or not share—a particular piece of content with a particular audience.

Social capital exchanges to share resources

Our second example considers *social capital* as a research context that benefits from sociotechnical approaches. Typically understood as “investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace” [50], social capital refers to the social and informational benefits individuals gain from and give to their social connections. Social capital figures prominently in research exploring well-being and social media use, perhaps because it offers a rich theoretical body of work, provides consistently robust empirical associations with usage, and has a good deal of face validity when offered as an explanation for why users continue to use social media despite a range of potentially adverse outcomes.

Although early work focused on global measures of social media use (e.g., Ref. [51]), recent sociotechnical approaches offer more nuanced insights into the mechanisms of how social capital processes shape and are shaped by social media use. Specifically, we point to the role of network dynamics as a key example of a sociotechnical approach. Consider, for example, what happens when network contacts comment on a question posted to a social media platform. They benefit in multiple ways, best understood through both social and technical frames. From a social perspective, they engage in social grooming behaviors, signaling to the poster that they value the relationship [52]. From a technical perspective, the dynamics of social media visibility mean that their comment is surfaced to a new network of users—friends of friends. Considering Granovetter’s [53] “strength of weak ties” framework, we know these ties may be valuable sources of informational support. Social media content is also made visible to newer users and networks via hashtags, which are powerful tools to spread content and ensure messages reach diverse users [54].

Facilitating social support through technical and social features

Conceptualized as communication that reduces uncertainty and enhances feelings of personal control over a situation [55], scholars from myriad disciplines and methodological traditions invoke *social support* in their investigations of relationships between social media use and well-being [56–58]. Over time, scholarship in this domain has moved away from examinations of the kinds of social support exchanges that social media enable [59] toward more granular explorations of how affordances of various social media platforms impact social

support exchange processes [57,58]. Incorporating an affordance lens in this work represents a necessary turn toward a sociotechnical perspective, as affordances emerge in the intertwined relationship between technical ‘action possibilities’ and human perception [24].

Increased attention to sociotechnical dynamics can help scholars unpack the complex, multi-directional, and multi-dimensional relationship between social media use and well-being. For instance, a sociotechnical perspective enables interrogation about anonymity on social media by acknowledging that anonymity is neither static nor binary. On its surface, Reddit exemplifies a platform that affords some technical degree of anonymity, as users post under pseudonyms and do not display follower-following networks, which can leak cues about one’s identity. However, identity cues can still be gleaned from the digital traces from previous user activity on the platform, visible on a user’s profile and legible to the informed investigator. Relying exclusively on a technical view of anonymity on Reddit ignores important social dynamics that emerge as users (re) appropriate technical features to reveal and conceal information; these sociotechnical practices intensely shape how users disclose personal information and exchange social support on the platform. For instance, throwaway accounts, or temporary secondary accounts unaffiliated with one’s main Reddit account, enable users to repurpose technical features of the platform to disclose requests for support in ways they feel are safer and more truly anonymous [60].

Broader implications of a sociotechnical perspective

To summarize, we argue that a sociotechnical perspective offers additional benefits for research on social media and well-being. As the examples above demonstrate, sociotechnical research approaches can be both more theoretically generative and better capture the real-world dynamics of social media use. Users engage in nuanced practices online, and their decisions may be highly contextual—dependent on the platform’s features and affordances, their self-presentational goals, the network they are interacting with, the level of identifiability, and much more. A sociotechnical perspective sets the table for these kinds of factors to emerge as relevant.

Traditionally, more technical disciplines like computer science have often ignored social science research methods, while the social sciences have not considered computational training necessary. However, this is no longer the case for social media researchers; the best approaches to many research questions will likely combine computational and social science methods. HCI—which emerged in the 1980s and combined psychology and behavioral science approaches into

computer science research—offers one example of a sociotechnical approach that infuses into scholarship at multiple levels. As suggested above, sociotechnical approaches encourage—and sometimes require—more multidisciplinary in research and training. With this in mind, we encourage more exploration of these methodological toolkits—and the training required to use them effectively—to researchers studying social media and other communication technologies, especially those working in fields like psychology. Regardless of the specific methodological practices, toolkits and datasets that emerge in the coming years, we are excited about the next generation of scholarship on well-being and social media use and the flourishing theoretical, methodological, and empirical developments that a sociotechnical perspective can inspire.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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