

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION AND PERCEIVED BEHAVIORAL CONTROL ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationship between emotional contagion and perceived behavioral control (PBC) in the context of social media use among university students. Emotional contagion is the tendency to adopt others' emotions, particularly through online platforms. Perceived behavioral control, a key component of the theory of planned behavior, reflects how much individuals believe they can perform a specific behavior. Using data from 100 university students collected via questionnaire, the study found a significant negative correlation between susceptibility to emotional contagion and perceived behavioral control. These findings highlight how emotionally charged content can impair users' ability to manage their social media interactions and suggest practical strategies for mental health professionals and educators to mitigate these effects. The study also explores implications for digital literacy programs and mental health education.

Keywords: emotional contagion, perceived behavioral control, social media, university students, theory of planned behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an essential part of college students' daily lives, providing platforms for communication, entertainment, and social interaction. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), nearly 90% of college students in the U.S. are active on social media, with sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter serving as main spaces for interaction. These online platforms not only enable information sharing but also support emotional expression, creating unique environments for understanding emotional dynamics. The idea of emotional contagion, first studied in face-to-face settings, is now recognized as an important aspect of social media use (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Emotional contagion is the automatic transfer of feelings between people, which can occur through various channels, including facial expressions, vocal tone, and, more recently, digital signals such as texts, images, and videos (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). Research shows that emotional contagion extends beyond direct interactions; users often pick up on

emotional cues from content shared by others, including sadness, happiness, and anger (Kross

et al., 2013). In addition, emotional contagion can occur without users' awareness, leading to significant shifts in their own emotional states (Coviello et al., 2014).

The emotional contagion theory states that people can subconsciously mimic and synchronize their feelings with those of others (Barsade, 2002). In face-to-face interactions, this happens through facial expressions and vocal tones. On social media, this emotional transfer occurs through written and visual cues. Kramer et al. (2014) provided experimental proof showing that reducing positive or negative emotional content in users' news feeds altered their emotional expressions afterward. Ajzen (1991) introduced the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain human behavior in terms of three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. PBC describes how individuals view the ease or difficulty of performing a behavior, which was measured

through validated questionnaires assessing perceived ease and control over social media interactions. Clarifying these measurement approaches helps readers evaluate the robustness of the findings and their applicability to broader populations.

This emotional interchange can significantly affect individuals' behavior, particularly their perceived behavioral control (PBC). The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) asserts that people's intentions to participate in specific behaviors are shaped by three elements: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the realm of social media, PBC refers to one's belief in the ability to effectively manage social media interactions, including regulating emotional reactions to content, controlling usage, and establishing limits on engagement. Prior studies have established that individuals with low PBC concerning their social media usage tend to report elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and compulsive behaviors (Kuss & Griffiths, 2015). Emotional contagion on social media can undermine an individual's PBC. For instance, when users encounter emotionally intense posts, their emotional responses could affect their subsequent behavior, such as increased engagement or rash reactions to content. This loss of control may result in excessive use or heightened emotional responses, especially in environments that consistently elicit strong emotions (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). In addition, increased emotional exposure on social media could alter how individuals perceive their capacity to manage their use, leading to a cycle of emotional arousal and reduced control. Despite these observations, empirical research exploring the specific link between emotional contagion and PBC in social media use remains scarce. Some studies have examined the psychological effects of emotional contagion (Kramer et al., 2014; Kross et al., 2013), while others have examined how low PBC affects online behavior (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Nevertheless, few investigations have directly examined how emotional contagion might affect individuals' perceptions of control over their online actions.

Social media has become an essential part of university students' everyday experiences, providing advantages for communication,

education, and emotional support. Nonetheless, these platforms also expose users to significant amounts of emotionally charged material, which can lead to emotional contagion, the phenomenon of 'catching' the emotions of others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Emotional contagion, typically examined in face-to-face scenarios, has also been documented in online settings (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). At the same time, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) highlights the importance of perceived behavioral control (PBC), one's perception of how easy or difficult it is to perform a behavior, in shaping behavioral intentions. When applied to social media, PBC can be understood as an individual's sense of agency over their engagement, encompassing scrolling frequency, emotional posting, and reactivity.

Given the emotionally stimulating nature of social media, this study investigates whether individuals who are more emotionally susceptible also perceive less control over their online behaviors. The primary hypothesis is that emotional contagion negatively influences perceived behavioral control on social media among university students.

Literature Review

Emotional contagion is the process by which emotions are transmitted between individuals, often through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and vocal tone (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). However, contemporary research shows that emotional contagion is not limited to face-to-face interactions and can also occur in digital environments. Research indicates that individuals can "catch" emotions from social media posts via text, images, and videos, particularly when such content is shared by individuals they are connected to (Kramer et al., 2014; Chua & DeVaney, 2020).

A significant advance in the study of emotional contagion is the recognition that social media platforms can serve as "emotional contagion hubs," where users encounter diverse emotional expressions across extensive social networks. In a landmark study, Kramer et al. (2014) experimentally altered users' Facebook news feeds, revealing that emotionally positive or negative posts could notably affect others'

feelings within the network. Similarly, Chua and DeVaney (2020) found that emotional content shared on Instagram was likely to elicit comparable emotional responses in users, especially among highly engaged followers.

Furthermore, a study by González-Pizarro et al. (2021) found that emotional contagion on Twitter and Facebook was especially pronounced during periods of social crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research showed that users were more likely to share emotionally charged content during stressful times, further intensifying the contagion effect within their circles. This trend, combined with the rapid dissemination of emotional posts, suggests that social media platforms serve as dynamic venues for the spread of emotional states, particularly among younger demographics such as university students. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) is a crucial aspect of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that a person's perceived ability to control their actions influences their behavioral intentions and actual behavior. Regarding social media, PBC refers to a user's ability to manage and regulate their online interactions, including the frequency of platform use and their emotional reactions to content.

Research has consistently indicated that lower perceived behavioral control (PBC) correlates with increased time on social media and a heightened struggle to manage emotional responses (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Various studies have also associated lower PBC with problematic social media habits, including social media addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2015). For instance, Turel et al. (2020) discovered that lower PBC strongly predicted compulsive social media use among young adults, particularly university students. This compulsive behavior, marked by intense emotional involvement with posts, often results in negative consequences such as anxiety and subpar academic performance.

More recently, Parker et al. (2021) examined the link between PBC and emotional regulation, proposing that those with low PBC are more prone to emotional reactivity to social media content. They suggested that social media acts as both an enhancer of emotional experiences and a source of stress, making users more vulnerable to emotional contagion while simultaneously

impairing their ability to manage their emotional reactions effectively. While emotional contagion and PBC have been studied separately, there has been limited investigation into how these two elements interplay within social media contexts. Emotional contagion may diminish PBC by shaping users' emotional reactions and influencing their subsequent behaviors on these platforms. Liu et al. (2022) noted that individuals who are more emotionally responsive to posts often struggle to manage their online activities, leading to increased emotional fatigue and diminished self-regulation regarding social media use.

In a recent study, Cerniglia et al. (2022) examined the evolving relationship between emotional contagion and PBC in relation to Facebook use. They found that users who displayed greater emotional contagion were more likely to report a diminished sense of control over their online behaviors, particularly when interacting with emotionally charged posts. This effect was intensified during periods of social or political turmoil, suggesting that emotional contagion has a more significant influence on PBC during emotionally charged situations. Moreover, Brailovskaia and Margraf (2020) found that emotional contagion on platforms such as Instagram was associated with feelings of emotional vulnerability, which subsequently reduced users' perceived control over their social media behaviors. They proposed that emotional contagion might create a cycle in which the emotional reactivity sparked by social media exposure weakens users' ability to establish healthy boundaries, further encouraging excessive use and emotional distress. Given the heightened attention to the psychological impacts of social media, recent research has focused on strategies to mitigate the negative effects of emotional contagion on digital well-being. For example, González-Pizarro et al. (2021) proposed that digital interventions aimed at helping users recognize and manage their emotional reactions could improve PBC, thereby decreasing adverse outcomes such as anxiety and addiction. They advocated for the implementation of emotion-awareness tools and digital literacy programs that promote critical engagement with emotional content.

Recent literature provides a solid foundation for understanding the individual and combined

effects of emotional contagion and perceived behavioral control in social media use. While emotional contagion continues to be a powerful force in shaping user experience online, the role of PBC remains crucial in determining how users navigate emotional exposure. This body of research underscores the need for targeted interventions and digital literacy programs that help students manage their emotional responses to social media and enhance their ability to control their online behavior.

The purpose of this research is to examine the link between emotional contagion and perceived behavioral control among university students actively involved in social media. We suggest that students who are more prone to experiencing emotional contagion will show lower perceived control over their social media use. This study aims to understand better how emotional interactions on digital platforms affect users' ability to manage their online behavior.

Hypotheses:

H1: Emotional Contagion, Perceived Behavioral Control, and Social Media use significantly correlate with each other among University Students.

H2: Emotional contagion and perceived behavioral control significantly predict emotional expression on social media in university students.

Materials & Methods

Participants

Participants were university students aged 18-30 years, enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate programs. A sample size of 100 students was targeted to ensure adequate statistical power for correlation and regression analyses. Convenience sampling was used to ensure representation across academic levels and disciplines.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Scale	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Range
Emotional Contagion Scale (ECS)	65.27	5.77	1 - 5
Perceived Behavioral Control Scale (PBC)	10.95	2.93	1 - 7

Inclusion Criteria: Active social media users (minimum of 1 hour/day). Currently enrolled university students. Consent to participate in the study.

Instruments

Emotional Contagion Scale (ECS) – Developed by Doherty (1997), this 15-item scale measures susceptibility to emotional contagion across five emotional dimensions: happiness, love, fear, anger, and sadness. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always). Perceived Behavioral Control

Scale (adapted from Ajzen, 1991) – This 6-item scale assesses the degree to which individuals believe they can control their behavior on social media (e.g., limiting use, avoiding triggering content). Items use a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Emotional Impact of Social Media Scale – A brief 10-item self-report questionnaire assessing emotional changes after social media use (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Rated on a 5-point scale.

Demographic Questionnaire – To collect data on age, gender, academic year, field of study, and average time spent on social media daily.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Participants were recruited through the university. A formal consent form was obtained to participate in the study. All instruments were administered. Descriptive statistics summarize demographic variables and scale scores. SPSS version 22 was used to analyze the data. Data were scrutinized and scored according to the manual instructions of the scales used in the study.

Emotional Impact of Social Media Scale (EIMS) 43.74 2.67 1 - 5

Correlation Analysis

Sr. No	Variables	1	2	3
1	Emotional Contagion	–	-.53**	.26**
2	Perceived Behavioural Control		–	-.25*
3	Emotional Impact of Social Media			–

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant correlation among emotional contagion, PBC, and the Emotional Impact of Social Media among university students ($p < .001$).

Regression Analysis

Predictor Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Emotional Contagion	Emotional Impact of Social Media	0.34	6.78	< .001
Perceived Behavioral Control	Emotional Impact of Social Media	-0.28	-6.78	< .001

We used regression analysis to examine how emotional contagion and perceived behavioral control affect the emotional impact of social media.

The results show that emotional contagion is a strong positive predictor of the emotional impact of social media ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 6.78$, $p < .001$). When people are more affected by others' emotions, they tend to experience stronger emotional responses while using social media.

On the other hand, perceived behavioral control is a strong negative predictor of the emotional impact of social media ($\beta = -0.28$, $t = -6.78$, $p < .001$). People who feel more in control of their behavior are less affected emotionally by social media. Being able to regulate one's actions may help reduce emotional vulnerability online. The predictors were statistically significant, suggesting that emotional processes and self-control mechanisms play a critical role in shaping individuals' emotional experiences on social media.

Discussion

This research supports the theory that emotional contagion is negatively correlated with perceived behavioral control in social media use among university students. The findings are consistent with Baumeister et al.'s (2007) self-regulation theory, which suggests that emotional arousal can exhaust the cognitive resources needed for behavioral regulation. Given that social media

sites are designed to elicit emotional responses, students who exhibit high levels of emotional contagion may be especially susceptible to impulsive or excessive engagement. These results highlight the importance of digital wellness programs that prioritize emotional regulation and awareness. The results of current research are significant and underscore the need for a digital detox. In a similar vein, Liu and Lee (2022) proposed digital detox initiatives to help individuals regain control over their emotional and behavioral responses to social media. These strategies are especially for university students, who often experience significant emotional contagion due to the intense social networking typical of university life. Additionally, the Global Web Index (2020) revealed that university students experience heightened emotional engagement with social media, dedicating considerable time to interacting with emotionally impactful content. This continual exposure, especially in conjunction with low PBC, could lead to emotional exhaustion and compulsive behaviors.

Implications

- **Mental Health Education:** Integrate emotional literacy and digital mindfulness techniques into university counseling services.
- **Design Recommendations:** Social media platforms could develop features to assist users in identifying emotionally charged materials and controlling their exposure.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional nature of the study limits causal interpretations. Future investigations should utilize experimental or longitudinal designs to determine directionality. Exploring mediators such as self-regulation abilities or mood states could also provide more comprehensive insights.

Conclusion

This study reveals a notable inverse relationship between emotional Contagion and perceived behavior: Real control on social media among university students. As digital spaces increasingly influence emotional experiences, comprehending these psychological mechanisms is crucial for fostering healthier online behaviors.

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