Digital Outing Confidence as a Mediator in the Digital Behaviour Regulation and Internet Content Awareness Relationship

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Abstract: *The public digital outing refers to people creating and sharing personal information over the social media platforms. This specific digital outing behaviour is none of the less uniquely vulnerable to the negative effects of the digital public, triggering the individual's digital self-confidence injuring, and negatively impacting individual's digital outing confidence. Starting from the assumption that the digital outing confidence might mediate the association between the IV internet content awareness and the DV digital behavioural regulation, we have investigated this relationship under a micro research driven from the database collected under the Erasmus+ project Hate's Journey. Our team has designed an 18 items online questionnaire composed by single items measures, testing different opinions and perceptions related to the digital behaviour construct. Project team has collected 206 valid responses from resident individuals of Spain, Romania, Turkey and Latvia. Results confirm the partial mediation of digital outing confidence in the digital behaviour regulation and internet content awareness relationship. Conclusions and implications are discussed.*

Keywords: *Digital outing confidence; digital behavioural regulation; internet content awareness; mediation.*

1. Introduction

Social networks can be an extremely useful environment for individual's personal development but at the same time, they can be very harmful to their own privacy. More and more people have started to share various aspects of their lives online. While this digital outing is intended to be relaxing and fun, it obviously also has a dark side (Rad, Dughi, Demeter, et al., 2019). The fact that people share personal plans and projects with friends and acquaintances represents indeed a boost of determination for pursuing that personal objective. Once people post about the desire for change, the apparent social pressure can turn into the best source of motivation. In addition, various studies have shown that when making a promise or a public statement, there is a much greater chance that individuals will respect it than if they didn't talk about plan with anyone (Gollwitzer et al., 2009).

The Digital outing concept derived from the desire to answer the question do people want to be digitally visible or do people always want to stay in the shade? The image individuals create about themselves and which they digitally promote is just as important as the personal values that underlie it. It takes attitude, visibility to stand out, to be distinct, to create a brand, to create the ultimate self-brand. People are digitally perceived as they want to be perceived, and it is a great advantage what social media has to offer for the construction and maintaining of this digital self-brand. Acknowledging the simple fact that it is much easier to communicate with people, reaching a considerable number of other digital identities with minimal effort, with a single click, people are facing with a very important choice: to be visible or to stay in the shade. It is true that even in the shadow personal developmental changes can be made, but for a truly important and major change, one at the societal level, visibility is needed. This is the main topic of the current research. Personal value is the intrinsic and extrinsic value of a person, being conceptualized by all the characteristics that define an individual: moral, spiritual, traditional or cultural values (Rad, Dughi, Roman, et al., 2019).

By sharing or not sharing certain values, individuals establish their belonging to a certain social group. The term of personal branding refers to the image we are digitally displaying and promoting when we have chosen to be visible. In order to bring social benefits, promoting a beneficial image needs to be based on well-established and widely recognized values. While individuals who are aware of the importance of promoting the image as a

means of discovering their own value, social media becomes the engine of this kind of bitter-sweet communication and visibility.

It has been recognized that researchers have to continue refining theoretical frameworks, methodological aspects and concepts assessment for a clearer understandings of the digital behavior dynamics (Rad & Demeter, 2019).

Regarding the concept of digital behavior regulation, we start from the assumption that an aggressive reaction is in fact a projection or a manifestation of a cognitive imbalance. Starting from the premise that in real life people adapt their behavior to the group of which they belong to, at a certain moment, constantly monitoring the behavior of others, in the digital environment this mechanism of regulation no longer functions, instead, researchers have documented other effective psychological mechanisms.

Suler's disinhibition model refers to seven core concepts: invisibility, asynchronicity, dissociative anonymity, dissociative imagination, solipsistic introjection, minimizing authority, and personality trait, namely mental stability (Suler, 2004). Dissociative anonymity (Suler, 2004) represents the principal factors behind the online disinhibition effect. In the digital environment people interact with peers in an anonymously fashion, felt like a protective coat. Under anonymity, people don't have to assume their own digital behavior unintegrated with their offline identity. Anonymity indulges the feeling of less vulnerability related to self-disclosing and to engage in digital antisocial type of behaviors.

2. Objective and hypothesis

Although the scientifically literature depicts evidence in numerous research contexts of the associations between psychosocial factors, one can find minimum information in digital outing confidence acting as a mediator in the digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness relationship. Therefore, we aimed to examine whether digital outing confidence would mediate the relationship between digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

In order to investigate the interactions of the youth digital well-being, our team has implemented the project Hate's Journey funded under Erasmus+. Our research team has designed a multiple specific sections

online questionnaire addressing 206 youth from Turkey, Spain, Latvia, and Romania.

A total of 206 participants from Romania (24.8%), Latvia (24.8%), Spain (24.8%), and Turkey (25.7%), characterized by an average age mean of 30 years, male respondents (39.8%) and female respondents (60.2%), with an educational level, of 3.9% - primary school, 1.9% - professional school, 29.1% - high school, 32% - Bachelor degree, 29.1% - Master degree and 3.9% - PhD level. Regarding professional status, unemployed respondents represent 5.8%, students represent 43.7%, volunteers represent 1% and employed are 49.5%.

The online time spent by respondents was: never or hardly ever (1%), every week (8.7%), almost daily (20.4%), several times per day (46.6%) and almost all the time (23.3%). As a general picture, the number of constant internet users is superior 69.9% when compared to non-users.

This research has used convenience sampling or consecutive sampling, due to the fact that its purpose was explorative. The total of participants were consecutively selected according to the order of appearance when completing the online questionnaire shared on social media platforms by each of the 4 project partner countries, each country targeting at least 50 respondents, according to the convenient accessibility principle. The sampling process ended by the time each of the 4 project partner countries reached their sample saturation (50) and time saturation (3 months). Data collection procedure was organized by four entities: Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades (Spain), Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad (Romania), Ucarli Genclik Dernegi (Turkey) and Young Folks (Latvia).

3.2. Instruments

Regarding the sample data descriptive (N=206), the following single research items were used:

• for digital behavioral regulation (M=3.31, SD=1.14) assessment this research used a single item measure – Item 8.3 On a one to five scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree, please indicate the level of your agreement with the following statement: I know what to do if someone acts online in a way I don't like.

• for digital outing confidence (M=3.46, SD=1.01) assessment this research used a single item measure – Item 25.4 On a one to five scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree, please indicate the level of your agreement with the

following statement: I'm confident creating and sharing my own social media messages.

• for internet content awareness (M=3.88, SD=1.00) assessment this research used a single item measure – Item 25.3 On a one to five scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree, please indicate the level of your agreement with the following statement: I understand the role social media websites/apps play in shaping the information and content I see.

3.3. Research design

The following mediation analysis, according to Baron and Kenny, were performed in order to address the research purpose. Shortly, we have used mediation analysis to test whether the influence of the IV internet content awareness on the DV digital behavioral regulation is fully or partially explained by the interference of the mediator digital outing confidence.

Partial mediation states that some but not all of the association between the IV and DV is accounted for by the mediator. Thus, partial mediation means that there is not only a significant relationship between the mediator and the DV, but there is also some direct relationship between the IV and DV. Partial mediation is therefore the case where the path from the independent variable to the dependent variable decreases in size but it is still different from zero when mediation variable is inserted.

In the current paper, to test for the mediation effect of digital outing confidence on the association between digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness, the following procedure was undertaken: a) regressing the mediator (digital outing confidence) on the IV (digital behavior regulation); b) regressing the DV (internet content awareness) on the IV (digital behavior regulation); and c) regressing internet content awareness on the mediator (digital outing confidence) and the IV (digital behavior regulation).

4. Results

Three regression equations have been used to check the mediating impact of digital outing confidence on the relationship between of digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness.

The first equation depicted a significant relationship between digital outing confidence and digital behavior regulation ($\beta=0.382$; $P<0.001$), suggesting that less digital outing confidence was linked with more digital behavior regulation.

The second equation calculated a significant relationship between digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness (β=0.339; P<0.001), suggesting that individuals with less internet content awareness experienced more digital behavior regulation. Digital behavior regulation explained 11% of the variance in internet content awareness.

The last equation of the mediation analysis revealed that both digital outing confidence and digital behavior regulation explained 24% of the variance in internet content awareness (R^2 = 0.24; with a p<0.001). Thus, the digital behavior regulation on internet content awareness effect was decreased in step three (β=0.188; P<0.001) compared to the second step (β=0.339; P<0.001) but remained significant, demonstrating that digital outing confidence partially mediated the effect of digital behavior regulation on internet content awareness.

5. Discussion

Our research results enlighten some understanding of the association among digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness, and their relationship to digital outing confidence in the context of youth hate speech situations over the internet.

Digital outing confidence partially mediated the relationship between digital behavior regulation and internet content awareness, indicating that digital outing confidence plays an important role in the context of youth hate speech situations, mainly that less digital outing confidence was associated with more digital behavior regulation and subjects with less internet content awareness experienced more digital behavior regulation.

The present research has a few limitations. Our study was limited by examining these data at only one time, so the interpretations of the mediation analyzes could have been influenced by this, so that there could be bidirectional associations between digital behavior regulation, digital outing confidence and internet content awareness that we could not examine in this research. For instance, it may be that individuals with more digital outing confidence and more internet content awareness may experience less digital behavior regulation. This study does, however, provide meaningful implications for the associations between these variables.

6. Conclusions

Many of individual's vulnerabilities and unmet emotional needs can be found in the relationship with social media and the digital content. Whether the reality is sometimes so painful that people cannot face it, either

they need external appreciation and validation for their behavior or that they no longer find joy and connection in their lives, the online environment appears as a saving solution. Often, the online environment is used as a way to escape from reality. In these cases, when experiencing discomfort in real life and not finding a solution to solve it, people use social media as a mechanism of calming, of emotional regulation. It is easier to overcome the discomfort created by a dispute with someone or an unpleasant situation if people chose to connect. In reality the problem does not solve, and the difficulty of handling the emotional imbalance will not improve but on the contrary. Rather, it would help to become aware of the reasons why people connect to social media and instead of using it as a regulating mechanism, to handle the emotions people experience and then to find ways to solve the situation in the environment in which the problem first time arose.

Using the digital environment gives people the illusion of a rich social life; socializing faster and easier, with a minimum investment of time and effort. In addition, this illusion also occurs due to multiple interactions (photos, likes, comments) in which personal responsibility is much lower. People certainly need socialization and relationships, good relationships being a predictor of wellbeing and mental health, but these involve authentic, direct interaction, time allotted, attention to each other's needs and reciprocity, which the online environment does not actually provide. Individuals use the connection because they feel validated almost instantly. The difficulty of living with insecurities and the need for external validation and attention is almost immediately met by the online network without making a real effort. Often narcissistic personalities use social media tools to validate their own image, but in fact external validation is what keeps the insecurities going (Nash et al., 2019).

Humanly, we need connection and we need to reveal ourselves and the fact that we have a very large audience at a click away from us often determines us to choose online versus offline, thus our brain perceives pleasure and the state of wellbeing installs much easier and effortlessly (Kringelbach & Berridge, 2010). Social media gives us the opportunity to create another image, the ideal image about our own person and at the same time gives us the right environment to support social comparisons. Often, they do not have a real basis, they are just other people's projections in the online environment, and unfortunately they are behaviors that support the symptoms of depression and anxiety. Whether we are physically comparing ourselves to the others digital images socially accepted, or comparing our relationship with all the images of happy couples online, all of them create a feeling of inadequacy and support our belief that a good life means a life

without impediments and difficulties, always positive emotions are present together with those of joy, exaltation, or enthusiasm. All of this impacts the way we relate to ourselves and those around us and rather creates or maintains our stress and dissatisfaction with our own real life (Myers & Crowther, 2009). Our insecurities are rooted in childhood and early childhood or adolescence experiences (Davies et al., 2013). The voices of the significant people in our lives are internalized and so we get to have a certain image about ourselves, we develop a protective self. Only by taking control of one's own life, by regaining autonomy we are able to change and eliminate the uncertainties. Any external validation only supports the image of the protective or false self, created by us in order to survive and not the real self, so that it actually maintains the uncertainties (Daehnert, 1998).

Social media addiction or spending too much time using social networks such as Facebook, Instagram (this behavior affecting the social life), is a compulsive behavior of excess using of social media platforms that has negative effects and interferes with other important activities (Lancaster University, 2019). Connecting online rather than offline (which is real and authentic) impacts the mental and emotional health but also the relationships (Lin, Su & Potenza, 2018). The impact on life is large, from interference with routine activities, postponing them, deteriorating or losing relationships until the loss of work or social isolation.

Social media use often impacts a couple's life. In the United States studies show that 1 in 5 marriages are ruined for this reason (McDaniel et al., 2017). Either there is already a problem in the relationship and because people do not know how to deal with them, one or both partners resort to this mechanism which unfortunately creates a rupture even more dangerous and the gap between the two deepens even more or the accessibility of social media is the one that determines the problems, there is a clear connection between the two. Moreover, social media promotes emotional infidelity, sharing intimate things with a person outside the couple's relationship; this form of infidelity is often difficult to identify in its own behavior, but the impact it has on the partner is as negative as physical infidelity (Mao & Raguram, 2009). Then, in the online environment it seems we can always find someone better, more suitable, who could understand us better, who would respond better to our needs and thus help us to rationalize the non-involvement in the couple relationship or worse, giving up. Unfortunately it is a vicious circle because in reality we need time to really know someone and any couple relationship reveals the vulnerabilities of both; it is only through conscious effort and patience moments of crisis can be overcome.

An analysis of one's own behavior is of great help in identifying where we are in this relationship and whether we should worry and possibly make a behavioral decision. If we feel the need and obligation to give importance to everything around us and to post online (from what we eat, what we see, what we do and what we feel), if we check our accounts every moment of pause, if we lose the notion time and we postpone the things we need to do to stay online affects our offline life then there is a high chances to develop a social media addiction.

How to regulate digital behavior? How to balance the consumption of social media? First of all, it is helpful to realize the reasons why we access social media. Before taking any decision to change our online behavior it is useful to understand what is really behind the desire and urgency to post what we do, what we think, where we are. What unmet need makes us always connected. What do I want to get when I post pictures with me? What is the reason why we lose our self-control and the notion of time when we are connected? At the same time, it is helpful to rebalance and redefine the role and time allocated to connecting to social media. There is a need to setting realistic goals and to give time and perseverance to this often difficult process. Changing habits could be a handy solution by creating new online access routines. Another solution would be to hinder access to this environment by deactivating the applications on the phone and refocusing on real life, offline, finding authentic joys and satisfactions, and rebuilding relationships.

People rush to make public their negative and positive emotions. We are social beings and we fully feel this need to share the feelings and stories of our lives with those around us. This phenomenon is universal and wherever there are communities, there will also be stories, and group experiences.

In 1991 Rimé introduced the term social sharing of emotions, theoretical concept and framework that supports our current findings (Rimé et al., 1991). It was found, among other reasons, that important life events activated individuals ' tendency to share their experiences with their emotional load (Rimé, 2009). Hence, these conclusions referring to the social sharing of emotions brought substantial contribution and fresh evidence-based perspectives to emotional process understanding.

In a research analysis of participants self-reports, Rime concluded about several main reasons that trigger the initiation of social sharing behaviors (Rimé, 2007), like: receiving help, support, and comfort (sympathy), legitimization (emotional validation), seeking guidance and advice, clarification and meaning, bonding (escaping loneliness), seeking

empathy, entertaining (facilitating social interaction) and drawing attention (impressing) – in order to receive others' attention.

Thus, people share emotions for a variety of reasons that are considered to bring a benefit: for recreational reasons, catharsis, finding meaning, gaining support and advice from others. Through social sharing individuals are able to interact, maintain and develop social bonds and become close with others.

A research conclusion suggested that there is clearer evidence that the digital content of social media has an increased negative impact on the wellbeing of the more socially isolated people than those who have an active social life (Pantic, 2014). Depression-related research is progressing on the positive side of social media use, suggesting that low mood and feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness (depressive symptoms) have been connected to the quality of digital interactions. There is evidence that higher levels of depressive symptoms in participants who reported more negative interactions (Davila et al., 2012), along with those that became victims of cyberbullying, those who formed a false overview about the lives of other people, and those who felt like spending time on social media was a waste (Garett et al., 2016).

The main conclusion of this research is that results bring evidence to the fact that social media and digital interactions impact people differently, depicting a clear dependency on preexisting conditions such as digital outing confidence and internet content awareness.

Further research is needed in order to understand how digital outing confidence can best be put into the benefit of digital behavior regulation based on persons' internet content awareness relationship.

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