THOUGHT LEADERSHIP BRIEF

#Favoritethings: Social Media Posts and Consumer Happiness

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KEY POINTS

▶ Use of social media is rapidly growing in emerging markets, yet relatively little is known about how the contents people post on social media affect their happiness.

▶ We find that posting photos of one's favorite possessions, under hashtags such as #Favoritethings or #Favoriteshirt, leads to greater happiness than posting photos of one's cumulative possessions or the baseline happiness level.

▶ This effect occurs because reminders of favorite possessions tend to reduce unfavorable social comparison, which is otherwise prominent on social media.

▶ While social media users often post their material possessions on social media, they do not have the "right" intuitions about the type of possession-related contents they should post to make themselves happier.

▶ Happier users tend to like the social media platform better. Thus, promoting trends for #favoritethings and similar hashtags can create a win-win situation, which benefits both the wellbeing of social media users and that of marketers and social media platforms.

ISSUE

The growing internet penetration in emerging markets allows increasing numbers of consumers from developing countries to participate in online communities. By 2020, over 900 million Chinese and 600 million Indians had gained access to the Internet, making China and India the two largest Internet user countries and marking an Internet growth rate of 3,796% and 11,200%, respectively, in the past two decades. This increasing penetration of the internet accompanies increasing usage of social media, which provides a free platform for people to broadcast their lives and to observe the lives of others from around the world. Thus, it is now more important than ever to understand how social media interactions may influence people's wellbeing.

People use social media to promote themselves, archive personal histories, and maintain social ties. However, social media usage has been shown to reduce happiness. This is, partly, because social media exposes people to rosy images of others' lives, which induces them to perceive others' lives as better than their own. However, despite this negative effect of social media on happiness, people continue to broadcast their lives and observe others online, as evidenced by the 2.4 and 1 billion active users on Facebook and Instagram respectively. Participation in social media by users from emerging markets is significant – with 280 million users, India represented the largest market for Facebook in 2020, followed by the U.S. (190 million users) and Indonesia (130 million users). By posting photos and messages about one's own life, while viewing others' posts about theirs, users on Facebook, Instagram and other social media can easily observe and compare lifestyles across geographic locations, cultures, and social statuses. Thus, understanding how social media influence happiness, particularly, whether it is possible for social media usage to *increase* happiness, has implications for the wellbeing of the ever-growing numbers of Internet users in emerging markets.

ASSESSMENT

The negative impact of social media on happiness may be related to the type of content that consumers post, namely, content pertaining to material consumption. One of the top five most popular hashtags on Instagram is #fashion. This hashtag is linked to over 800 million posts about fashion items. Another popular hashtag is #luxury, which is linked to over 110 million posts of luxurious experiences and products[1]. These examples suggest that people often post about material goods on social media. Such posts may be associated with reduced happiness, as research suggests that consumers who post about material consumption on social media tend to be more materialistic, and materialism has been shown to reduce happiness. Moreover, material things are easy to compare; thus, posting and viewing posts about material things may induce upward social comparisons. That said, here we ask, is posting about material consumption invariably associated with less happiness, or can consumer derive more happiness if they post different types of content?

Our data suggest that reminding consumers of their favorite possessions – material possessions that are special and carry personal meaning – can in fact increase happiness, and this occurs under conditions when social comparisons are prominent (e.g., on social media). This is because, while material possessions generally tend to foster social comparisons, and impede long-term happiness, consumers who focus on their favorite possessions are less likely to compare what they have with what others have. This, in turn, makes them happier. Therefore, an effective way to increase happiness associated with social media usage should be to reduce the tendency for social comparisons that otherwise abounds on social media. In particular, we suggest that an effective way to increase happiness on social media is for people to post contents related to the (less popular) hashtag, #favorite.

To test our prediction, in a behavioral experiment, we asked participants to take a photo of their material possessions and upload the photo on a webpage. Half the participants were asked to take a photo of their favorite shirt and upload the photo on an interface that mimicked the *#favoriteshirt* page on Instagram. In contrast, the other half of the participants were asked to take a photo of all the clothes in their wardrobe and upload the photo on an interface that mimicked the *#wardrobe* page on Instagram. All participants were asked to include the corresponding hashtag, as well as any other captions they would like, on their posts. After posting their photos, participants reported their overall satisfaction with their lives. We found that the type of content consumers posted predicted their overall life satisfaction, such that those who posted #favoriteshirt were happier than those who posted #wardrobe (Figure 1). In a follow-up experiment, we also observe that posting a #favoritething – a favorite material possession in any product category – compared to not posting anything at all, increases not only users' overall life satisfaction, but also their liking of Instagram as a social media platform (Figure 2). These results suggest that posts of one's favorites on social media benefit both the users' wellbeing as well as the social media platform.

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Figure 1. What type of posts make people happier?

Legend: #Favoritething, Not posting. Groups: Life Satisfaction (#Favoritething 4.72, Not posting 4.4; p = .02), Liking of Instagram (#Favoritething 4.81, Not posting 4.23; p < .001)
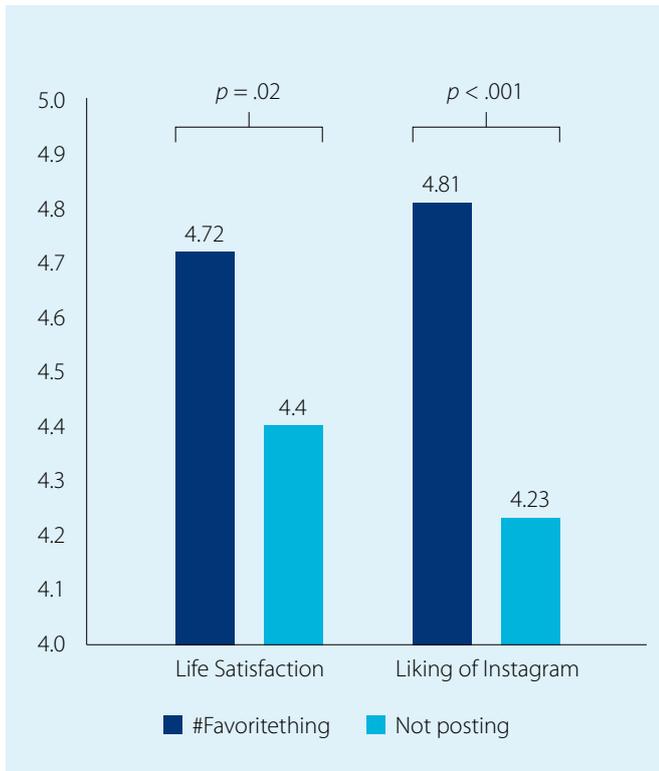
Figure 2. Does posting a favorite make people happier and like Instagram more?

Legend: #Favoritething, #Wardrobe. Life Satisfaction (#Favoritething 4.54, #Wardrobe 4.29; p = .04)
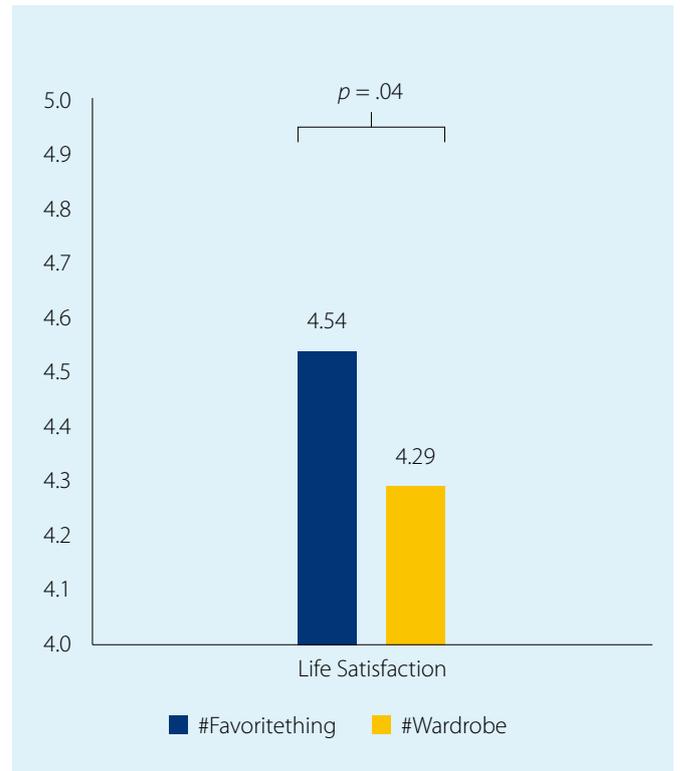
In a related behavioral experiment, we collected data from eight countries (China, India, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Spain, Russia, Chile, and Mexico) with varying economic status, income inequality, and cultural values. We found that reminding people of their favorite possessions increased their overall life satisfaction, particularly among those who perceive income inequality to be high in their country, and also for those who live in a country with high actual income inequality, low GDP, high power distance, or high collective (vs. individualistic) values. While this experiment was not conducted directly in the context of social media, the findings are in line with the Instagram studies reported above. People may improve their happiness when they direct their attention to their favorite possessions (e.g., by simply writing about them or by posting online), perhaps especially for those from emerging markets (e.g., where income inequality is higher and GDP is lower).

So, do people have the "right" intuitions about the type of content they should post on social media to make themselves happier? We sought to understand what people think are common topics posted on social media and, when it comes to posting about material possessions, which posts they think would make them, personally, happier – posting about a few of their favorite things or posting about a superset of their possessions? Our survey revealed that, in general, people recognize that the common topics of social media posts include material things and possessions (along with activities and experiences, and friends and family), whereas less common topics include animals, nature, and personal values and beliefs. When it comes to material things and possessions, people are equally likely to post about a favorite possession as they are to post about their many possessions, and they do not intuit that posting about their favorite possessions (versus the many things they own) would make them happier. However, we also found that happier people do tend to have the "right" intuition. People who are more satisfied with their lives also tend to perceive that happiness comes from posting and sharing about a few of their favorite things, as opposed to the many things they own, on social media..

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RECOMMENDATION

Our research suggests that how social media affects happiness depends on the type of content that people post. People are happier when they post about their favorite things. This might be associated with the characteristics of favorite possessions – that they are special and carry idiosyncratic value and personal meaning – and people are less likely to engage in upward social comparison when they think about their favorite things. These findings have implications that are particularly important in emerging markets, where internet penetration and social media participation are booming. Access to the internet and social media can increase exposure to a more affluent lifestyle that one cannot attain, fostering upward social comparisons and negative psychological consequences, such as feelings of relative deprivation and lower wellbeing. However, when people post about

their favorite things on social media, they may be more resistant to social comparison and, as a result, experience greater happiness from their social media usage.

Moreover, our findings reveal that not everyone intuits that posting about their favorite things on social media can make them happier. Given consumers' generally high frequency of posting about material possessions, it is important to develop strategies that encourage consumers to post in ways that will make them happier. To this end, marketers can promote trends for #favoritethings and similar hashtags. Doing so may not only improve the wellbeing of social media users, but also benefit marketers and social media platforms because happier social media users also tend to like the social media platform better. This can produce a win-win situation that will make everyone happier.

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