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Satisfaction With life and Internet Use: Reasons for Individual's Social Engagements?

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ABSTRACT

Background: Contrary to attention given to satisfaction with life as a dependent variable in the majority of previous studies relating to social capital, the present study examines the effects of satisfaction with life on social capital. 569 academics from Malaysian public universities were selected as respondents of the study. **Objective:** The study investigated the relationship between satisfaction with life and dimension of social capital, participatory capital. This study also examined Internet use as playing the role of a mediator. **Results:** Findings indicated a significant positive relationship between satisfaction with life with participatory capital. It was found that individuals who were more satisfied with their lives were more likely to participate more in social engagements than those who were less satisfied with their lives. It was also found that asocial Internet use partially mediated the relationship between satisfaction with life with participatory capital. **Conclusion:** The finding also showed that Internet use might be an antecedent to social capital, but played a somewhat limited, though important role, as a mediator of the effects of satisfaction with life on participatory capital.

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INTRODUCTION

No man is an island. Not one individual may choose to live life alone. Everybody needs someone else in order to live (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). If we choose to deny this, to accept that living on our own is actually possible, then societal living is very much unnecessary. Individuals prosper when we have someone whom we can trust and rely on (Cross & Thomas, 2008), someone who we know will be there in time of need, someone who is willing to spend time, give information or even lend money to us without expecting anything in return. This someone and the 'resources' they bring with them are our social capital. Like physical, financial, and human capital are crucial for an organization, social capital is crucial for individuals (Burt, 2001; Lin 2001).

The concept of social capital, therefore, offers researchers and scholars alike the missing link that helps explain how individuals overcome life challenges. Best and Kruger (2006) argue that the dynamic interactions that occur in both formal or informal settings encourages a deeper conversations that consequently resulted in a stronger relationships. These strong relationships come in the form of higher reciprocity, bigger information networks, and stronger relationships (Coleman, 1998). By drawing on this social capital, Best and Kruger (2006) claim that individuals can achieve ends that otherwise would be unfeasible if relying solely on physical, financial and human capital alone.

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition – or in other words membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital" (pp.248-249). Bourdieu identifies social capital as a resource or asset that can be accessed from social connections or relationships with other members of the network and that these resources or assets can later be cashed in terms of social mobility. In relation to the above, Coleman (1998) further suggests that there are three types of useful resources embedded in social relations. The first, called "obligations, expectations and trustworthiness", refers to a form of 'credit slip' that arises when an individual does something for another and trusts him/her to reciprocate this in the future. The second is the potential for information that inheres in social relations and finally, trust is a third form of social capital, which not only facilitates certain actions but also constrains others.

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The present study examines the influence of the satisfaction with life on individual decision to participate in his or her communities. The participations ranged from just making contact with relevant authorities to active involvement in community activities or programmes such as community donation drives, or attending community association meetings. This study argued that, often time, important life decision is greatly influenced by the individual's satisfaction with his or her life. Satisfaction with life refers to individuals overall assessment of feelings and attitudes about one's life at a particular point in time (Diener, 1984). Individuals with a high level of satisfaction with life are characterized as those who have loving relationships, and contribute to society via their work and civic engagements (Oishi *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, they also exude confidence, are optimistic, and exhibit high levels of self-efficacy. They are likeable, flexible, sociable, and are unnerved by new challenges or stress. They are, therefore, not easily discouraged or swayed by issues or problems that are not to their liking. In fact, instead of withdrawing, they become more involved with the problem or issue at hand (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). According to Fredrickson (1998, 2001), experiencing satisfaction with life in general, places individuals in an ideal position whereby they have the ability to "broaden and build". This is due to the "valenced mood" acquired when one reaches a certain level of satisfaction with life, which stimulates individual's thinking, feeling, as well as influences actions. In other words, once an individual reaches a certain level of satisfaction, they begin to look beyond their own personal well being and increasingly seek to address broader concerns (Lyubormisky, King, & Diener, 2005; Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007).

In recent years much public attention has also been paid to the probable role of the Internet in relation to social capital (Beaudoin, 2008; Best & Krueger, 2006; Ker, 2009; Romer, Jamieson & Pasek., 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005; Uslaner, 2004). Initially, the emergence of the Internet as a communication and social interaction tool was met with great hope for revitalizing the "faltering sense of community afflicting the late modern societies" (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001, p.550). Internet use has also been argued to have stimulated the renewal of public debate, as seen through political blogging and citizen journalism on various political and social issues. In their study of the effect of participation in listservs, bulletin boards, and chat rooms on social capital, Kobayashi, Ikeda, and Miyata (2006) found that online interactions have positive effects on offline social capital. They found that online communities can be a powerful tool in building social capital.

The Internet arguably, is seen as a powerful technology that has now become one of the key media for the dissemination of news, information and entertainment (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). There is almost an infinite number of websites, online games and other services devoted to news, indoor entertainment, and leisure activities available over the Internet, and it is argued to attract the satisfied (Amiel & Sargeant, 2004). Wellman *et al.* (2001) state that Internet users are not necessarily individuals who are unhappy or dissatisfied with one or more aspects of their life, but can also be users who use the Internet to complement their daily routine activities, such as reading online newspapers, searching for information for personal interest, work or school purposes, or blogging, which are examples of activities most common among individuals in this category. Agreeing with the findings of Amiel and Sargeant (2004), Pasek *et al.* (2009) contend that there is emerging evidence that suggests individuals who use the Internet most often for information seeking, are already politically-knowledgeable, interpersonally-trusting, and civically-engaged. Furthermore, information seeking behaviour on the Internet has been found to have a positive impact on the mobility and civic participation of individuals because they receive empowering information (Eveland *et al.*, 2004; Pasek *et al.*, 2006; Shah *et al.*, 2001a).

In view of the foregoing discussion, broad research questions that guided the present study are:

RQ1: Does satisfaction with life predicts participatory capital?

RQ2: Does Internet use mediate the relationship between satisfaction with life and participatory capital?

Methods:

The present study's population comprised academics from Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions. Currently, there are 20 public and 466 private operational universities in Malaysia, with a total of 50,556 academics (MOHE 2010). This study employed a stratified simple random sampling whereby the main stratum was the type of university. There were 25,297 academics in the public universities (MOHE, 2009) at the time of conducting this research. From each of the twenty strata of the public universities, a sample was then drawn proportionate to its size. Table 1 presents the sample and percentage of responses received from the respective strata.

Malays made up 85% (484) of the respondents, followed by Chinese, 7% (40), Indians 3% (18) and other ethnicities 5% (27). This finding is in line with the ethnic composition of Malaysia, which is also reflected in the Malaysian public universities, where Malays are the majority, followed by Chinese, Indians and other ethnicities (MOHE 2009)

The Pearson correlation analysis was used to describe the strengths and directions of the linear relationship between satisfaction with life and participatory capital, meanwhile hierarchical multiple regressions were used to assess the ability of predictor variables satisfaction with life to predict participatory capital, after controlling for the influence of age, gender and income. The uniqueness of hierarchical multiple regressions (also referred to as sequential regressions, Pallant, 2005), is that the entering of the variables was done in steps or blocks in a

predetermined order. In the first block/step, control variables were entered at step 1, followed by predictor variable in step 2. In addition, path analysis was used to determine the presence of the mediating effect on the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The most widely used method to assess mediation is the causal steps approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). To establish mediation, Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed a four-step approach in which a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted and the significance of the coefficients was examined at each step.

Table 1: List of academics who participated by University.

	Name of University	f	%
1	International Islamic University of Malaysia(IIUM)	49	9
2	Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM)	99	17
3	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	47	8
4	Universiti Malaya (UM)	46	8
5	Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)	4	1
6	Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UMP)	16	3
7	Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	37	7
8	Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	11	2
9	Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UniMAP)	14	3
10	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)	21	4
11	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA)	15	3
12	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	26	5
13	Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM)	6	1
14	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	20	4
15	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)	12	3
16	Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	29	5
17	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (Utem)	21	4
18	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)	21	4
19	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)	33	6
20	Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	42	7
	Total	569	100

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The zero order correlation conducted revealed a moderate positive relationships between satisfaction with life and participatory capital ($r=.31, p<.05$). Zero order correlations were also performed to get an overview of the relationship between the predictor variables, satisfaction with life and Internet use. There is a positive relationship between the predictor variables and Internet use. Nevertheless, the relationships between the two were found to be very weak ($r=.10, p<.05$). Table 2 presents the finding of regression conducted to test the impact of satisfaction with life on participatory capital.

Table 2: The Effects of General Satisfaction with Life on Dimensions of Social Capital.

Predictor Variables	Participatory Capital (N=551)
	β^a
<i>Block 1</i>	
Age	.10 ^d
Gender	-.09 ^b
Income	.09
Incremental R ² (%)	
<i>Block 2</i>	
Satisfaction with Life	.30 ^d
Incremental R ² (%)	
Total R ² (%)	

^a Final standardized beta

^b $p < .05$,

^c $p < .01$

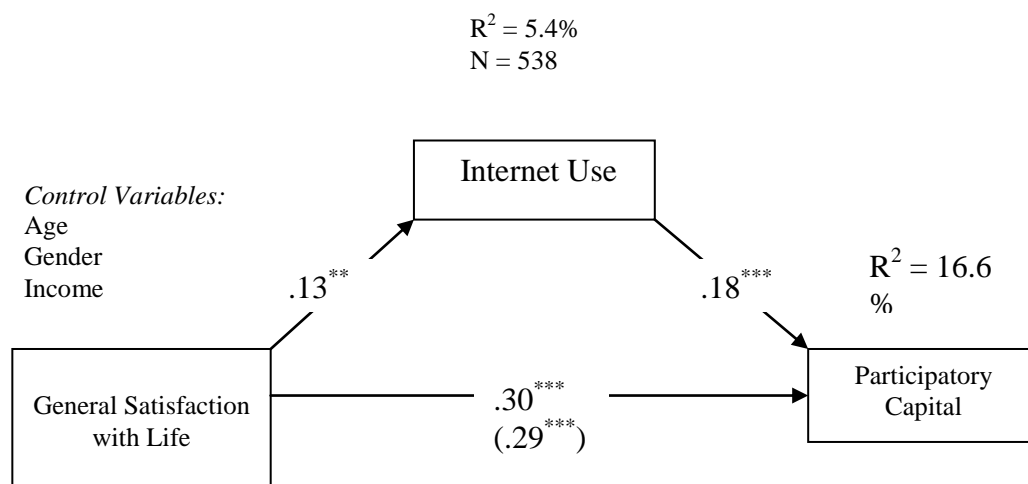
^d $p < .001$

After controlling for the effect of the control variables, age, gender and income, satisfaction had a significant effect on participatory capital. For every standard deviation unit increase in satisfaction with life, it can be predicted that there will be a corresponding .30 standard deviation increase in participatory capital ($\beta = .30, t(547) = 7.46, p < .001$). Satisfaction with life contributed an additional 9 percent of explained variance in participatory capital.

It was hypothesised that Internet use would partially mediate the relationship between satisfaction with life and participatory capital. Following the hierarchical multiple regression approach of Baron and Kenny's

(1986), the effect of general satisfaction with life on participatory capital needed to be tested first to confirm that there was an effect that might be mediated. This is done by regressing participatory capital on satisfaction with life. The result shows that, after the effect of the control variables was removed, satisfaction with life significantly predicted participatory capital ($\beta = .30$, $t(553) = 7.463$, $p < .00$). Therefore, for every standard deviation unit increase in satisfaction with life, we can expect to see a corresponding .30 standard deviation unit increase in participatory capital. The finding also indicated that satisfaction with life explained a significant proportion, i.e., 13 percent of the variance in participatory capital, $R^2 = .13$, $p < .001$, $F(1, 548) = 21.05$, $p < .001$.

Next, the correlation between Internet use and satisfaction with life needed to be established. To do this, as Internet use was treated as the criterion variable in the regression equation and satisfaction with life as the predictor variable. The result showed that satisfaction with life significantly accounted for 5 percent of explained variance in participatory capital. In step 3, participatory capital was regressed both on satisfaction with life and Internet use. Finally, in step 4, to check whether the mediation hypothesis held up, the coefficient relating Internet to participatory capital use must be significant (step 3) The results of regression analyses testing mediation effects of Internet use on the relationship between satisfaction with life and participatory capital are presented in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 4.1, the beta weight when participatory capital was regressed alone on satisfaction with life was .30. The beta weight dropped from .30 to .29 when asocial Internet use was added into the equation. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), full mediation is obtained if the predictor variable is controlled (satisfaction with life has no significant effect on the outcome variable (participatory capital) when the mediator (Internet use) is controlled). Therefore, these results indicated that Internet use only partially mediated the relationship, hence, the hypothesis is supported.



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Value in parentheses is the reduced correlation coefficient when the mediator is present.

Fig. 1: Path Analysis result indicating relationship among Satisfaction with Life, Internet Use and Participatory Capital.

The aim of the study was to examine the effect of satisfaction with life and Internet use on participatory capital. The findings have given support to the hypothesis that stated Internet use would partially mediate the relationship between satisfaction with life and participatory capital. In this study, Internet use was referred to as solitary activities such as blogging, reading online newspaper or religious sites, sending and receiving emails. The finding confirmed that satisfaction with life had an effect on Internet use such that those who were satisfied with their life used the Internet more for instrumental purposes, as shown earlier also by Amiel & Sargeant (2004), and that the Internet is not necessarily for interaction only. In fact, it is also used to complement daily lives. Wellman *et al.* (2001) asserts that the Internet blends into people's life whereby, people use it to maintain existing social contacts as well as continue their interest online. Reading the vast information available online, that comes from various sources with different perspectives, not only stimulates the thinking minds and influences perceptions, but may also promote attitudes that influence actions (Kennan, Hazleton, Janoske & Short, 2008; Zhang & Chia, 2006, Shah *et al.*, 2001a). Nevertheless, this finding needs to be taken with caution and further replications of the model in different settings and contexts need to be conducted. This is because the respondents of the present study, being academics with university jobs, are very highly educated, and falling in the middle to high income groups were atypical of the general population in Malaysia. Moreover, Pasek *et al.* (2009) have contended that there is emerging evidence that suggests most often the Internet is used

for information seeking by the already politically-knowledgeable, interpersonally-trusting, and civically-engaged individuals.

Conclusion:

The present study's findings are modest and preliminary, yet insightful. This study has tried to explore the role of the construct Internet use in a simultaneous examination of the linkage to elaborate the relationship among satisfaction with life, Internet use and participatory capital. The present study has also revealed the indirect way in which satisfaction with life affects participatory capital, that is via Internet use. Reading about current news, blogging and expressing one's opinion related positively with satisfaction with life, consequently affecting individuals' engagement with his or her community. It should be significant for future research to determine the extent blogging, particularly political blogging, and self-expressions affect individuals' participatory capital. The present study has only scratched the surface of these factors, and yet the findings have already revealed an intriguing insight. Examining audience perceptions of the freedom of expression, or how much restraint should be practiced while engaging in the above mentioned online activities and the effect on participatory capital would be an interesting extension to this study.

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