An Examination of the Incidental Emotions from Personal Use of Technology at Work

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of employee Personal Use of Technology at Work (PUTW) has brought about the need to understand its consequences on work behavior. Specifically, this proposed study investigates the impact of the incidental emotions brought about through the interjection of personal tasks while at work. We hypothesize that personal tasks such as social media use impact emotions that carry over into a subsequent work task. Additionally, we hypothesize that the time spent performing such a personal task influences both the effect of PUTW on emotions and the impact of emotions on work behavior. To test these hypotheses, an experimental design is proposed and described.

Keywords

Personal Use of Technology, Incidental Emotions, Social Media.

Introduction

The ever-increasing ubiquity of technology has dramatically increased the prevalence of technology in individuals’ personal and work lives. Technological advances have not only increased the demands placed on individuals, but also the availability of those demands at all hours of the day (Hunter et al., 2017). For example, the arrival of mobile smartphones brought with it the necessity of constant accessibility to family, friends, co-workers, etc. (Mazmanian, 2013). The expansion of 24/7 services provides many individuals with the ability to complete any kind of task at almost any time throughout the day. These same technological advances have also increased the flexibility organizations can offer their employees regarding both work time and location. Such flexibility allows employees the ability to work from anywhere, completing work even outside of what were traditional “work hours.”

As a result, the archaic demarcation between personal and work activities is no longer the norm for employees across a range of industries. Employees are increasingly utilizing technology to complete a wide variety of personal tasks intermixed with work tasks throughout the day (Andreassen et al., 2014). This behavior, referred here as Personal Use of Technology at Work (PUTW), while once deemed a “deviant” behavior in the workplace (Lim, 2002), is becoming more common. The availability of personal tasks and the flexibility offered to employees accentuates the confluence of personal and work tasks.

As the prevalence of PUTW has increased, so has the interest given to the behavior by researchers. One primary interest among research on this topic lies with understanding the consequences of PUTW on work performance (Askew, 2012). Since the primary objective of employees, from the perspective of the organization, is to perform work tasks at work, it stands to reason that we should fully understand the consequences of completing personal tasks.

Much of the research on PUTW has centered on two primary conclusions. First, that employee engagement in PUTW has a direct, negative effect on work performance (Stewart, 2000). Any time spent by employees completing personal tasks is time not spent completing work tasks. Thus, PUTW is viewed as a form of theft, whereby employees are shirking work responsibilities to achieve personal objectives. The second primary conclusion of PUTW research is that the behavior indirectly influences performance through positive emotional consequences (Coker, 2011). Researchers in this camp argue that PUTW can be utilized as a form of stress relief or escapism from work responsibilities, thereby improving morale and the energy...
required to successfully complete work objectives. In summary, much of prior research on the consequences of PUTW have focused on the negative rational and positive emotional consequences of the behavior.

Missing from this research stream is the recognition that personal tasks can have negative emotional consequences which could carry over and impact work behavior. Many personal tasks, such as social media browsing and personal communications, have affective consequences that must be considered when evaluating the total impact of PUTW on work performance. Researchers in psychology have established that incidental emotions (those that are brought out by an ancillary task) can impact a primary task in many ways (Tsai and Young, 2010). Thus, the primary research question for this paper is as follows: How do the incidental emotional consequences of PUTW impact work performance?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of incidental emotions stemming from PUTW on work performance. In doing so, we seek to connect and contextualize research on both the emotional consequences from the personal use of technology as well as the impact of those incidental emotions on work performance. Additionally, through multitasking research, we seek to understand how the crossover from personal to work tasks uniquely influences work performance.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

![Figure 1 – Theoretical Model](image)

**Emotional Outcomes of PUTW**

The personal use of technology (specifically, social networking applications) – whether in a work setting or elsewhere – can elicit emotions in users (Verduyn et al. 2017). Much of the recent research has examined the effects of browsing Facebook on users’ emotions, with a majority of studies focused on students (Lin and Utz 2015; Tandoc et al. 2015), and other studies examining samples beyond students (Kross et al. 2013; Sagioglou and Greitemeyer 2014). The research has examined outcomes ranging from happiness (Lin and Utz 2015) to envy (Appel et al. 2016) to depression (Tandoc et al. 2015). Recently, researchers have begun to examine the effects of social media use on platforms beyond Facebook, such as Lup and colleagues’ study of the effects of the use of Instagram on its users’ psychological well-being (Lup et al. 2015).

As users interact with social networking applications during PUTW, they may be prompted to evaluate their subjective well-being (Verduyn et al. 2017). When experiencing higher levels of subjective well-being, Verduyn et al. (2017) explain that individuals can be characterized by “frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and global sense of satisfaction with life” (p. 278). Interacting with social networks during PUTW may increase subjective well-being, as Lin and Utz (2015) explain that users’ increased tie strength generated by browsing Facebook can increase their feelings of happiness.

Personal use may also produce negative – and potentially destructive – results. Some negative emotions are attributed to a mismatch between the expectation of feeling better after using social media (e.g. Facebook) and the reality of viewing that time as non-meaningful (Sagioglou and Greitemeyer 2014). Other negative emotions are derived from feelings of envy and decreased feelings of satisfaction (Kross et al. 2013). Krasnova et al. (2013), Appel et al. (2016), and Lin and Utz (2015), among others, explain that Facebook usage ultimately leads to feelings of envy as users compare their social standing with those that they see in their social media feeds. Beyond Facebook, Lup et al. (2015) see similar results when examining the impact of Instagram usage on social comparison. These collective negative emotions generated as a result of PUTW lead us to expect passive social media use while at work influences individuals’ emotions.
Hypothesis 1: Passive social media use while at work influences incidental emotion.

Impact of Incidental Emotions

Incidental emotions may linger beyond the exposure to social media applications such as Instagram (Andrade and Ariely 2009; Beal et al. 2005) and ultimately affect subsequent decision making. Andrade and Ariely (2009) explain that "decisions based on a fleeting incidental emotion can become the basis for future decisions and hence outlive the original cause for the behavior (i.e., the emotion itself)" (p. 1). As these emotions linger, they may distract and occupy cognitive resources that are normally needed to execute work-related tasks (Beale et al. 2005; Blanchette and Richards 2010). In their review of research on emotion and decision making, Lerner et al. (2015) explain that "the research reveals that emotions constitute potent, pervasive, predictable, sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial drivers of decision making" (p. 799).

The carryover of incidental emotion (Lerner et al. 2015) can have significant effects on subsequent task performance. One particular task - the evaluation of others – has been the subject of significant research (Dasgupta et al. 2009; Dunn and Schweitzer 2005; Fried et al, 2000). The valence of the incidental emotion will likely color the evaluations of both known and unknown individuals. In their discussion of issues surrounding performance appraisals, Graen et al. (2010) call for greater attention to reviewer affect when evaluating the validity and impact of performance evaluation. Reviewer affect appears to serve as a significant influence on overall performance evaluation.

Hypothesis 2: Incidental emotion influences the evaluation of others.

Affective Task Switching

Multitasking literature indicates that a further consideration in PUTW is the nature of the tasks that an employee is switching between. Social media use has a high degree of emotional involvement (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013), and thus can be classified as an affective task. Conversely, work tasks often have less emotional involvement, and thus are best classified as non-affective. An interesting dynamic emerges when individuals switch between affective and non-affective tasks. According to research by Reeck and Egner (2014), affective tasks occupy a “privileged” position in human minds as compared to non-affective tasks. This means that, given the presentation of both types of tasks, individuals will expend more energy on the affective task, prioritizing it above the other. In cases of task switching, individuals more easily switch from affective tasks to non-affective tasks than vice versa (Reeck and Egner, 2014).

Given this insight, we anticipate that the length of time spent in the affective task will influence the amount of emotional carryover into the non-affective (e.g. work) task. Individuals that spend more time looking at social media should have more difficulty moving away from that task and reverting to their work task. Two individuals that have the same level of incidental emotion (directed toward their social media use) may experience different impacts on their work behavior depending on the time spent passively engaging with social media. While both should experience emotional carryover, those that spend more time passively viewing social media should have more difficulty switching back to the utilitarian task.

Thus, we predict that time will moderate two relationships. First, the relationship between engagement in PUTW and incidental emotion, such that more time spent in passive Instagram use should increase the emotional consequences. Second, the relationship between emotions and work evaluations, such that more time spent in passive Instagram use should increase the impact of emotions on the individual’s evaluations.

Hypothesis 3a: Time moderates the relationship between passive social media use and incidental emotion.

Hypothesis 3b: Time moderates the relationship between incidental emotion and the evaluation of others.

Proposed Methodology

To test our hypotheses, we will be employing an experimental design. Experiments are suitable for this type of investigation, for a number of reasons. First, in order to properly examine the impact of emotions on behavior, it is important to situate the emotional cue as proximate as possible to the resulting behavior. Second, an experimental design provides the opportunity to examine the effect of incidental emotions on a consistent work behavior, rather than a range of behaviors that a survey methodology would examine. Thus,
researchers have long used experiments to examine the impact of emotions on behavior (e.g. Moran and Schweitzer, 2008; Tsai and Young, 2010 among many others).

**Participants**

The participants in our experiment will be students from a large state university on the West Coast. The students will be divided into four conditions, determined by the amount of time spent in passive Instagram use. One condition will involve no time spent in passive Instagram use, with the other three conditions consisting of 5 minutes, 10 minutes, and 15 minutes of passive Instagram use. Care will be given to ensure that all of the participants have active Instagram accounts before inclusion in the experiment.

**Procedure**

Participants will be given a series of essays written by their (hypothetical) subordinates to review. The essays will be of varying degrees of quality, with the same five essays presented to each participant. The participants will spend 20 minutes reviewing the “individual” that wrote each essay in the first phase of the experiment. Following this phase, depending on the condition, the participants will be asked to spend either 0, 5, 10, or 15 minutes passively viewing their Instagram feed. They will be required to avoid posting any content or comments, or “liking” any of the content in their feed. Upon the conclusion of the time interval, the participants will be asked to put away their mobile device and resume the reviewing activity. Incidental emotion will be evaluated upon the conclusion of the passive Instagram use. Items will be modified to specifically address the emotions that stem from the Instagram use.

**Potential Impacts**

There are three primary goals we seek to accomplish with this study. First, we aim to illuminate the lack of research regarding the impact of the emotional consequences of PUTW. Given the prevalence of the behavior, it is vital that we examine all of its consequences in detail. A complete examination of all consequences is beyond the scope of this initial study, but we hope to incite future research that can form a more complete picture of the behavior and its effects.

Second, we seek to connect two mature research streams that deserve more attention in Information Systems. There is a wide range of scholarship on the emotional consequences of technology use. Similarly, much research has been performed on the impact of incidental emotions on work behaviors. PUTW provides an interesting context in which to examine these research streams in tandem, seeking to understand how one connects with the other.

Finally, we hope to provide managers with a greater understanding regarding the effects of technology on the behavior of their employees. Only when we understand the nature of these effects can they be properly mitigated or, if appropriate, accentuated in a strategic manner. Thus, our study should provide some evidence of the impact of PUTW that managers can utilize in the workplace.

**REFERENCES**


