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Exploring the Effects of Societal Cynicism on Social Media Dependency

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Cover Page Footnote

Note: This paper is dedicated to our esteemed co-author, Francesca Masciarelli, whose recent passing has deeply saddened us. Francesca was a distinguished member of the University of Chieti-Pescara's faculty and a valued colleague, friend, and dedicated scholar. Francesca was renowned not only for her academic excellence but also for her vivacious spirit and love of life. Her ironic wit and joyous demeanor brought inspiration and happiness to everyone around her. Her presence will be profoundly missed by her family, friends, colleagues, and the countless students whose lives she touched. We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Francesca and share memorable moments with her. It was a true pleasure. Francesca, your memory will forever remain in our hearts and minds. This manuscript underwent peer review. It was received 08/10/2022 and was with the authors for 20 months for three revisions. Kent Marett served as Associate Editor.

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Abstract:

The Social Media landscape is characterized by constant and rapid changes, with new platforms emerging in the market and existing ones evolving by integrating new features. Amidst this dynamic environment, the phenomenon of Social Media Dependency (SMD) has become particularly salient. This study seeks to explore individual usage behavior on Social Media with a specific focus on SMD. In contrast to previous research that predominantly examines Social Media addiction, our emphasis lies on the utilitarian, rational, and goal-oriented aspects of Social Media usage. We analyze the impact of individual attitudes on SMD by integrating expectancy-value theory with media system dependency theory. Specifically, this paper investigates how one particular social axiom construct – Societal cynicism – influences SMD, taking into account the variations in the usage patterns between two widely used Social Media platforms: Facebook and YouTube. Through the development and validation of a research model, this research aims to shed new light on understanding the dependency phenomena within the context of Social Media.

Keywords: Societal Cynicism, Social Media Platform, Social Axioms, Social Media Dependency.

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1 Introduction

The Social Media landscape is characterized by constant rapid changes as new platforms arise in the market and current players evolve by integrating new features (van den Eijnden et al., 2016). Currently, approximately 64.4% of the entire human population of the planet is on the internet (approximately 5.16 billion users, mostly using primarily mobile devices) and around 4.76 billion people are active Social Media users (Kemp, 2023). Social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based technologies that allows users to easily create, edit, evaluate and/or link to content or other creators of content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). They are socio-technical information platforms (T. Wang et al., 2013) and encompass social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, and websites dedicated to content sharing (Lam et al., 2004).

The hectic diffusion as well as the pervasive and disruptive nature of Social Media has captured the attention of researchers in the past decade (Hornung et al., 2018; Wan et al., 2017). Among the several emerging streams of Social Media research, studies focusing on technology dependency have gained notoriety as they aim to understand an important aspect of human behavior in relation to these socio-technical information platforms (Han et al., 2019). Although there are different forms of dependency (e.g. psychological or utilitarian), investigating social media dependence issues should be particularly relevant considering that, based on a recent study, online users feeling addicted to social media belong mainly to Gen Z (ThinkNow, 2019) that is the category of users spending on average more than 7 hours on the Internet per day and representing the most active social media users (Kemp, 2023). Another recent report states that 54% of teens (those ages 13 to 17) consider it somewhat hard to give up social media (Vogels et al., 2022). There is a stream of research investigating the role played by technology dependency in influencing individuals' reasoned usage decisions (Barnes et al., 2019; Bata et al., 2018; Sorensen, 2011; Turel et al., 2011). There are also serious societal concerns about the harmful aspects of individuals' dependency on social media. One example is the recent lawsuit by New York City with its school and healthcare systems against the tech giants (Ables, 2004).

In literature, studies investigating the effects of dependency on Social Media usage take mainly into account the emotion-related psychological state of dependency, often adopting or referring to the concept of "addiction" (Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013; Klobas et al., 2019; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). It is important to highlight that psychological dependency (addiction) should not be confused with goal-oriented dependency. While the two concepts may be related and may influence individuals' reasoned technology usage decisions, addiction tends to focus on the more negative effects of technology usage as it relates to a psychological state of maladaptive dependency on the use of technology to such a degree that typical obsessive-compulsive behavioral symptoms arise (Barnes et al., 2019). On the other hand, goal-oriented dependency captures the extent to which an individual's capacity to reach their objectives depends on the use of specific technology, and it also tends to focus on the more positive consequences (Carillo et al., 2017). For the aim of this paper, we focus on the utilitarian and goal-oriented technology dependency, supported by the core assumptions of the Media System Dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

The social context constraining and influencing individuals' behavior in seeking to achieve a specific goal is an important factor to be taken into consideration when investigating Social Media dependence (SMD). Social axioms are one of the ways to evaluate individual perceptions of the social context (Bond, Leung, Au, et al., 2004). Leung et al. (2002) propose a set of social axioms that identify individual social beliefs about the world in which each person lives and works. Social axioms may predict an individual's actions and are described as individual assessments and beliefs about the social context affecting individuals' behavioral choices (Bond, Leung, Tong, De Carrasquel, et al., 2004). Among those social axioms, *societal cynicism* is a cultural dimension (Bond, Leung, Tong, De Carrasquel, et al., 2004), viewed as a negative assessment of social events and human nature (e.g. 'Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses'). It differs from other definitions of "cynicism", which usually refers to an attitude or behavior (Salmela-Aro et al., 2016). Societal cynicism is a type of "negative view about people and social institutions" (K. Leung et al., 2010). The societal relevance of such issue is further supported by a recent report revealing that Gen Z (especially those between 18 to 26 years old) generally lack trust in political and societal institutions, in large technology companies as well as in the information they generally find on social media (Hrynowski, & Marken, 2023).

Some scholars investigate the effect of societal cynicism on some forms of dependency or addiction, such as the gambling disorder propensity (Wu et al., 2019) or the Internet gaming disorder tendency (Yang et

al., 2022). Other scholars found that a higher level of social cynicism is associated with a higher problematic smartphone usage ("excessive, addictive, and/or inappropriate smartphone use, with accompanying risks to physical and mental health, as well as social impairment in daily living") (Zhang et al., 2021).

Focusing on the utilitarian view of dependency, we seek to explore the effects of *societal cynicism* on Social Media dependency. This is particularly relevant for younger audiences, especially Gen Z, who largely do not trust information distributed on social media and use their capabilities and the characteristics of social media platforms for identifying fake news (mediamakersmeet, 2024), looking for "honesty and transparency for the content they consume" on social media (Roman, 2024). As a result, we intend to further investigate how the use of different sets of Social Media platform functionalities can positively or negatively affect the relationship between social cynicism and Social Media dependency

Our theoretical contributions are twofold: first, we contribute to Media System Dependency theory by exploring the antecedents of Social Media dependency, specifically considering the social context user's perception, such as *societal cynicism*. Secondly, we seek to explore how different Social Media functionalities can affect the user's perception of Social Media dependency.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide the theoretical background, followed by the presentation of the proposed model and hypotheses. Then, we present research methodology, data analysis, and results. The paper wraps up with a discussion, including recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Media

Social media are digital platforms that allow individuals to connect, communicate, and share content and information in real-time over the internet (Wan et al., 2017). These platforms allow users to create a profile, post text, images, videos, and messages, and interact with other users. Social media has become an increasingly popular means of personal communication, allowing people to connect with others from all around the world (Rishika et al., 2013). The widespread adoption of Social Media among individuals and businesses attracted researchers to examine social-technical factors (Wan et al., 2017), as well as the motivations behind the use of such technologies (Rishika et al., 2013). All forms of online interactions, improved by Social Media usage, share the same purpose: make people´s mobilization, discussion, and decision making possible in virtual community settings (Arazy et al., 2011; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Majchrzak et al., 2013). Through Social Media activities, individuals and members of social groups with common interests are involved in exchanging information, collaborating, and building relationships (Edosomwan et al., 2011). Such activities engage in a variety of areas such as business strategy (Baptista et al., 2016), healthcare services (Spagnoletti et al., 2015), and political participation (Federici et al., 2015) among others.

In literature, the term addiction is considered as a particular emotion-related psychological state causing behaviors such as obsessive-compulsive in the use of Social Media, investigating the positive and negative effects on various dependent variables (such as continuance intention to use).

Differently from the literature investigating the Social Media addiction phenomenon, this paper focuses on the utilitarian and goal-oriented facet of Social Media dependency. Supported by the core assumptions of Media System Dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989), it intends to explore the antecedents of Social Media dependency. Further details about Social Media dependency are provided in the following section.

2.2 Social Media Dependency

During the past two decades, the growing number of cases of Internet and video-game-related behavioral disorders made scientists aware of the negative effect of technology dependency - IT addiction (Carillo et al., 2017), often recognized as a clinical disorder (King et al., 2012). Early research contributions, especially in cyberpsychology, started to investigate issues concerning technology dependency (Beard & Wolf, 2001; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Whang et al., 2003). The body of IS research that has explored technology dependency has mainly focused on IT addiction, examining it in a variety of contexts such as online auctions (Turel et al., 2011), online games (Xu et al., 2012), social networks (Thadani & Cheung,

2011; Turel & Serenko, 2012), and smartphones (Carillo et al., 2014; Lapointe et al., 2013). The literature focusing on Social Media frequently associates the term "dependency" with describing the problematic use of Social Media (related to a psychological state). On the other hand, the term "addiction" is often used to describe the resulting behavior (Barnes et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2015). A stream of research regarding the study of Social Media platforms includes contributions investigating the effect of addiction in using Facebook (Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011) and YouTube (Klobas et al., 2019). In such literature, the term "addiction" is considered as a particular emotion-related psychological state causing behaviors such as obsessive-compulsive in the use of Social Media, investigating the positive and negative effects on various dependent variables (such as continuance intention to use). Alternatively, in line with the core assumptions of the Media System Dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), we use the term "dependency" to refer to the utilitarian, rational, and goal-oriented usage of Social Media (Carillo et al., 2017).

Differently from the literature investigating the Social Media addiction phenomenon, this paper focuses on the utilitarian and goal-oriented facet of Social Media dependency. Supported by the core assumptions of Media System Dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989), it intends to explore the antecedents of Social Media dependency. In the past, Media System Dependency theory has been used to investigate dependency relationships through mass communication channels such as television (Grant et al., 1991; Nossek & Adoni, 1996; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998), radio, and newspapers (Loges, 1994; Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993). From the beginning of the 21st century, some studies have revisited Media System Dependency in relation to the use of the Internet (Jung et al., 2001; Leung, 2009; Lyu, 2012; Patwardhan & Yang, 2003). More recently, it has been used to investigate dependency relationships with IT healthcare services (Lakshmi & Rajaram, 2012), mobile technology (Stafford et al., 2010), IS work performance (Deng & Chang, 2013), and ubiquitous media systems (Carillo et al., 2017). MSD defines dependency as a "relation between individuals' goals and the extent to which these goals are contingent upon the resources of the media system [in which] those resources have the capacities to create and gather, process and disseminate information" (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Hence, dependency relations are goal-oriented, while the scope and intensity of the goals directly impact the strength of the dependency relationships between the user and the media (Ball-Rokeach, 1998; Jung et al., 2012).

Individual Media Dependency (IMD) derives from MSD and provides concrete means to assess individual-level dependency relations with regard to a specific media (Grant et al., 1991; Loges, 1994). In line with use and gratification research (Katz et al., 1973), IMD assumes that the extent to which a media is capable of fulfilling a person's needs and expectations will stimulate dependency relations with the media per se which, in turn, impacts on usage patterns and media selection (Grant et al., 1991; Loges, 1994). In the same manner, considering Social Media as a specific medium, the dependency relation between a person and Social Media develops proportionally to the extent it is able to fulfill a person's needs and expectations. In line with IMD theory, this contribution defines SMD as *the extent to which an individual's capacity to reach his or her objectives depends on the use of Social Media* (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984; Grant et al., 1991).

According to IMD theory, there are six levels of dependency relations between an individual and a media system (Alcañiz et al., 2006; Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Grant et al., 1991). These levels can be represented as the product of three distinct goals: *understanding*, *orientation*, and *play*; and two different goal targets: *personal* and *social* (see Table 1). *Understanding* refers to the need of individuals to gain a basic understanding of themselves and to understand their social environment (including the perception of everyone's role in society). *Orientation* relates to the need one has to make behavioral decisions and to have guidance for interacting well with other people. *Play* pertains to the capacity of the media to provide an individual with the mechanisms for relaxing and releasing stress when he or she is alone or accompanied by others.

Table 1. Typology of Individuals' Social Media Dependencies (Adapted from: Ball-Rokeach (1985))

	Understanding	**Orientation**	**Play**
Personal	Self-understanding: Use of Social Media for basic understanding of themselves	Interaction orientation: Use of Social Media to make a behavioral decision	Solitary play: Use of Social Media for relaxing and releasing stress when individuals are alone

Social	Social understanding: Use of Social Media for the understanding of the social environment	Action orientation: Use of Social Media to have guidance for interacting correctly with other people	Social play: Use of Social Media for relaxing and releasing stress with other people

2.3 Social Axioms and Societal Cynicism

The social context constraining and influencing individuals' behavior in seeking to achieve a specific goal is an important factor to be taken into consideration when investigating SMD. Leung et al. (2002) propose a set of five social axioms that identify individual social beliefs about the world in which each person lives and works, where societal cynicism is one of them.

Individual's general beliefs about the world (Hahn, 1973; Leung et al., 2002) provide a different type of general orientation that may be predictive of values (Hahn, 1973). Individual beliefs vary across a *continuum* (Hahn, 1973), but some beliefs are general and may be viewed as generalized expectations (Rotter, 1966). These general beliefs are likely related to social behaviors across geographical contexts and time (Leung et al., 2002). The locus of control represents a proper example. A general belief about the causes of events has been related to how individuals make sense of their personal failures or successes (Gupta et al., 2018; Spector, 1982). Also, individuals usually face situations in which they apply their knowledge about the world in general to make decisions about how to behave (Leung et al., 2002). This knowledge may be construed as the personal representation that individuals develop over their life experiences about the social context defining their actions in the world. Therefore, adding general beliefs to trans-situational values would increase the predictive power of values with respect to behavior.

Drawing on qualitative research and on literature on beliefs, Leung et al. (2002) developed a social axiom survey. Social axioms may predict an individual's actions and are described as individual assessments and beliefs about the social context affecting individuals' behavioral choices (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004; Leung et al., 2002). They identified the following five factors of beliefs: (i) *reward for application* is the position of those who believe that an investment of human resources will lead to positive outcomes (e.g. 'Hard working people will achieve more in the end'); (ii) *societal cynicism* is a negative assessment of social events and human nature (e.g. 'Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses'); (iii) *social complexity* is the view of those who see multiple solutions to social issues and the result of events as indeterminate (e.g. 'One has to deal with matters according to the specific circumstances'); (iv) *fate control* is a general belief that external forces affect social events (e.g. 'Fate determines one's successes and failures'), and finally (v) *spirituality* is the view that spiritual forces influence the human world (e.g. 'Religious people are more likely to maintain moral standards'). These five dimensions and their defining items have been identified in 40 countries, making this instrument adaptable to different nationalities and not influenced by the national culture.

When analyzing the data on a specific country level, the authors merged the five original social axioms into two main factors: *societal cynicism* and a combination of the other four factors labeled *dynamic externality* (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004). While dynamic externality is a culture-level reflection of the belief structures, and it is based on "a congeries of items that constitute four distinct factors at the individual level", *societal cynicism* appears to be a new cultural dimension, it is viewed as a negative assessment of social events and human nature (e.g. 'Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses'). It is associated, among other aspects, with higher levels of competitiveness and more frequent access to the Internet (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004). Since Social Media usage can enhance competitiveness (Tajudeen et al., 2018), for the purpose of this study we seek to explore the *societal cynicism* effects on Social Media dependency.

Societal cynicism differs from the concept of *cynicism* used in other studies. In literature, *cynicism* is often correlated to an emotional state, such as frustration, and hopelessness, connected to failure in achieving expected goals, reducing efficacy in doing a task, or making decisions (Choi et al., 2018). Frequently it is considered as one of the dimensions of burnout in professionals (Salanova et al., 2000) or in educational context (Hietajärvi et al., 2019). Other scholars consider cynicism as a component of a Machiavellian attitude for manipulating people through the use of Social Media (Abell & Brewer, 2014).

Societal Cynicism is a negative assessment of human nature and social events (e.g. 'Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses', 'powerful people tend to exploit others', 'it is easier to succeed if one knows to take shortcuts'). Previous literature has related societal cynicism with low interpersonal trust (Singelis et al., 2003), highlighting that this correlation derives from the belief that the other will exploit you if the

opportunity arises (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004). Societal cynicism has been related also to a lower use of collaborating and compromising conflict style (Bond, Leung, Au, et al., 2004), and to a higher use of assertive influence tactics, such as repeated pleading, pressure, and upward appeal (seeking help from a higher authority), for obtaining compliance from others (Fu et al., 2004). On the basis of such findings, scholars agree that individuals high in societal cynicism are less trusting and more rigid in their understanding of social events. Moreover, societal cynicism was positively correlated with the values of power and conformity, and negatively with the value of self-direction (Leung et al., 2007), supporting the view that the negative view of human nature and social institutions are associated with societal cynicism.

2.4 Hypotheses Development

In line with the definition of the three distinctive goals of the IMD (Alcañiz et al., 2006; Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Grant et al., 1991), individuals can use SMD to: (i) gain a basic understanding (perception) of themselves and the social environment (including the roles played by others); (ii) make behavioral decisions and interact with other people; (iii) relax and release stress, alone or together with others (Carillo et al., 2017). The social context constraining and influencing individuals' behavior in seeking to achieve a specific goal is an important factor to be taken into consideration when investigating Social Media dependency (SMD).

Humans tend to make decisions reflecting biases inherent in their perceptions of their social environment (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Social influence can affect user behaviors in several domains (Venkatesh & Morris, 2000), such as engaging in online communications through the use of Social Media. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), subjective norms ("the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 188) are one of the possible determinants of behavioral intention. Another social component affecting online behavior is social presence, which is related to the awareness of other users in the system (Walter, 1992). Several studies show how the presence, although if it is just potential or perceived by the individual, could foster a conforming behavior or avoid a potentially socially unacceptable behavior (Vance et al., 2015). Lin et al. (2019) extend this notion by investigating how individuals' perception concerning the effects of sharing their information on Social Media could affect their attitudes toward information-sharing behavior and how Social Media characteristics may influence this attitude. Moreover, individuals' perception of anonymity in the social context affects online behavior, such as how the mechanisms of disinhibition (when people who are inhibited from performing a specific behavior offline feel free to perform it online) and deindividuation (when people lose their sense of individuality and personal responsibility) change people's online behaviors (Lowry et al., 2016). When using Social Media, the individuals' perception of the social context can affect their dependence on Social Media (Wang et al., 2015).

Leung et al. (2002) propose a set of five social axioms that identify individual social beliefs about the world in which each person lives and works. Social axioms may predict an individual's actions and are described as individual assessments and beliefs about the social context affecting individuals' behavioral choices (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004). Despite the other four social axioms, *societal cynicism* appears to be a new cultural dimension, it is viewed as a negative assessment of social events and human nature (e.g. 'Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses'). It is associated, among other aspects, with a higher level of competitiveness and more frequent access to the Internet (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004). Individuals high in societal cynicism are less trusting in others and society in general more rigid in their understanding of social events, less faith in the information or social interactions on Social Media. They are characterized by low interpersonal trust and have a negative view of human nature and social institutions (Singelis et al., 2003). Their pronounced lack of trust in others, as well as broader skepticism toward society at large, can be manifested in several ways in their social media behavior.

These individuals often possess low levels of interpersonal trust, underpinned by a negative view of human nature and a pervasive distrust of social institutions. They tend to be more cautious about sharing personal information due to this pronounced lack of trust. In fact, trust in social media platforms significantly influences users' willingness to share personal information. Lower levels of interpersonal trust may result in increased skepticism as well as cautious online engagement (Khan et al., 2023; Koohang et al., 2022). Moreover, these individuals tend to adopt a more rigid and skeptical stance when interpreting social events and the information they encounter on social media. They are less likely to readily accept information at face value and often approach it with a critical lens (Quiring et al., 2021).

However, these individuals may also be drawn to social media not for trust-building purposes but as a means of gathering information about others. They may engage in online activities driven by a desire to validate their negative perceptions of society or to find evidence that aligns with their cynical outlook. This

can lead to a cycle where they rely more heavily on social media as a source of information and affirmation, despite their initial mistrust of the medium (D'Errico et al., 2022; Dupuis et al., 2024; Temple et al., 2022). Paradoxically, their dependence on social media platforms can be amplified by cynicism.

In addition, it's important to note that their dependence on social media platforms can take various forms. For instance, some of these individuals may use social media as a platform to defend their opinions, engage in trolling, participate in flame wars, or exhibit other forms of deindividuated behavior (Seidman, 2013). In this context, their lowered perceptions of social presence and disinhibition can become significant factors contributing to their dependency on social media. The anonymity and detachment afforded by online interactions may paradoxically make social media an appealing arena for these individuals to express their cynicism, provoke reactions, or engage in confrontational behavior (Campisi et al., 2015; Raman et al., 2023).

The intricate relationship between societal cynicism and Social Media dependency stems from a complex interplay of low interpersonal trust, information-seeking behavior, and the desire for validation. This interconnection ultimately influences their growing reliance on Social Media platforms, creating a unique dynamic. In summary, thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Societal cynicism positively affects SMD.

Considering that societal cynicism is correlated with low interpersonal trust (Singelis et al., 2003), users with a high level of societal cynicism are less inclined to develop relationships. Moreover, since this correlation derives from the belief that the other will exploit you if the opportunity arises (Bond, Leung, Tong, et al., 2004), the same users tend to avoid information sharing about their identity and presence. At the same time, individuals high in societal cynicism are likely to collect information shared by others, in order to be more aware of what is going to happen, limiting possible problems, since they "believe that their problems are caused by social institutions and others who impede their personal progress" (Bond, Leung, Au, et al., 2004). In doing that, they exploit sharing and group functionalities provided by a specific Social Media.

In 2019, Facebook and YouTube were the most popular Social Media[1], and they are among the most analyzed Social Media platforms in the academic literature (Weller, 2015). The former is a social networking site where users can create profiles, connect with friends and family, and share various forms of content such as photos, videos, and written posts. Facebook's main focus is on connecting users with people they already know, allowing them to share personal updates and engage in social interactions with those in their social circle (Joinson, 2008; Urista et al., 2009). Facebook's content is generally more personal in nature and often revolves around individual users' personal lives and relationships (O'Riordan et al., 2016). The latter, on the other hand, is a video-sharing platform that allows users to upload, view, and share videos (Burgess & Green, 2018). While users can create profiles and subscribe to other channels, the primary focus of YouTube is on video content. Unlike Facebook, where users mainly share personal updates and photos, YouTube content is often more professional in nature and may include music videos, tutorials, movie trailers, news segments, and more. YouTube is often used by creators to share their work and reach a wider audience (Klobas et al., 2019).

We rely on the Gratification Theory of Social Media which posits that individuals use Social Media platforms to satisfy specific needs and desires (Whiting & Williams, 2013) and that the gratifications they receive from using these platforms are key factors in determining their usage patterns and behaviors (Ezumah, 2013; Whiting & Williams, 2013) to explore the differences between Facebook and YouTube. According to the Gratification Theory of Social Media, users are motivated to use Social Media platforms based on the gratifications they receive from using them. These gratifications include social connections, entertainment, information seeking, and personalization. Regarding social connections, Facebook is known for its emphasis on social interactions, allowing users to connect with friends and family and share personal updates. The platform provides gratifications related to social connections, such as social support and a sense of belonging. YouTube, on the other hand, is more focused on entertainment and information seeking. While users can create social connections on YouTube by subscribing to channels and commenting on videos, this is not the primary focus of the platform. Regarding entertainment, YouTube is primarily known as an entertainment platform, with many users seeking gratification in the form of entertainment and enjoyment from watching videos. In contrast, Facebook's entertainment value is more centered on social interactions and connecting with others. While users can share entertaining

[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

content on Facebook, it is not the primary focus of the platform (Joinson, 2008; Urista et al., 2009). Pertaining to information seeking, while both Facebook and YouTube can provide gratification in the form of information seeking, they differ in their approach. Facebook's emphasis on personal updates and social interactions means that users may seek information on specific topics from their friends and family (Balakrishnan & Shamim, 2013; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). YouTube, on the other hand, provides a wealth of information through video content created by a variety of creators and channels, making it a popular platform for educational and instructional content. Finally, YouTube's algorithm is designed to provide personalized recommendations to users based on their viewing history and preferences, providing gratification in the form of a personalized viewing experience. Facebook's algorithm is also designed to provide personalized content, but its focus is on content that will engage users and keep them on the platform, such as posts from friends and family or viral videos (Klobas et al., 2019).

Based on the distinct attributes of each Social Media platform and the diverse incentives that drive individuals to use them, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a. The use of Facebook negatively moderates the relationship between Societal cynicism and SMD.

H2b. The use of YouTube positively moderates the relationship between Societal cynicism and SMD.

3 Research Method and Measures

Data collection was conducted among students enrolled in BA and Master courses in Management and Political Sciences. Researchers communicated a link to a Google Form during class hours and the questionnaire was self-administered by the students. The time required for the completion of the questionnaire was 15 minutes. We collected a total of 622 complete responses. The questionnaire was structured in 3 sections as follows: the first section collected information about age, gender, use of Social Media, and frequency of usage. Section 2 focused on SMD items and lastly, the third section referred to the items related to the social axioms. Since data were collected in Italy, the items initially were written in English and subsequently translated into Italian. Back-translation was applied to check the accuracy of the translation and changes were made if inaccuracies were revealed (Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995). To increase the response rate, we guaranteed confidentiality and confirmed that data would be used only for academic purposes. Finally, an online questionnaire was created using the Google Forms tool and a pre-test was carried out to ensure clarity.

The main descriptive results follow: 43% of the respondents are less than 19 years old (n=266), while 47% are between 20 and 24 (n=295), 8% are between 25 and 29 (n= 52), 2% are over 30 (n= 9); 313 respondents declared to be male (50%), and 309 declared to be female (50%). Descriptive statistics relevant to the years of usage of the Social Media sites in the sample are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Statistics Relative to Social Media Usage

		No account	**Year(s) since first registration**					
			1	2	3	4	5	6+
Facebook	Freq.	37	9	25	86	178	195	92
	%	5.95	1.45	4.02	13.83	28.62	31.35	14.79
	% cum.	5.95	7.40	11.41	25.24	53.86	85.21	
YouTube	Freq.	242	51	45	90	83	55	56
	%	38.91	8.2	7.23	14.47	13.34	8.84	9
	% cum.	38.91	47.11	54.34	68.81	82.15	91	

The variables used in this study were constructed as follows: the dependent variable is SMD. SMD measure is based on the most commonly used media dependency scale (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984; Grant et al., 1991). The set of items was adapted to the context of the research. Societal cynicism has been measured using the items provided by the literature (Leung & Bond, 2004; Leung et al., 2002). The usage of Social Media is based on the item “How much time do you spend on the following Social Media daily?” Answers are based on a 7-point scale ranging from “less than one hour” to “more than 10 hours” and it is a self-reported measure. While self-reported measures of technology usage time may not accurately reflect actual time spent, they remain one of the most commonly used methods for assessing usage (Rosen et al., 2013). Junco (2013) found significant and reasonably high correlations between self-reported and actual time spent among university students, despite some differences in the estimates. Moreover, we adopted a 7-point Likert scale, which has been shown to reach the upper limits

of the scale's reliability (Allen & Seaman, 2007). We controlled for (i) *Age* measured as the number of years of the respondent, (ii) *Motivation,* as the percentage of time spent on Social Media for leisure compared to work activities, and (iii) *N. of Social Media platforms,* as the number of Social Media used by the respondent (ranging from 0 to 5, considering the Social Media mentioned in Table 2). Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics, Table 4 reports the correlation matrix.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	**Std.Dev.**	**Min**	**Max**
Social media dependency	-1.01	0.888	-1.305	2.220
Societal cynicism	0.00	0.904	-3.005	3.568
YouTube usage	1.442	1.170	0	7
Facebook usage	1.513	0.986	0	7
Societal cynicism *YouTube	0.166	1.733	-9.532	13.804
Societal cynicism *Facebook	0.024	1.850	-9.014	13.919
Age	20.974	3.166	18	55
N. of Social Media platforms	3.826	1.210	0	5
Motivation	0.804	0.195	0	1

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

		[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]
[1]	Social media dependency								
[2]	Societal cynicism	0.140							
[3]	YouTube usage	0.050	0.157						
[4]	Facebook usage	0.123	0.027	0.107					
[5]	Societal cynicism *YouTube	0.130	0.791	0.166	0.002				
[6]	Societal cynicism *Facebook	0.076	0.823	0.102	0.104	0.705			
[7]	Age	-0.077	-0.078	0.035	0.148	-0.080	-0.062		
[8]	N. of Social Media platforms	0.028	0.062	0.365	0.179	0.033	0.028	0.283	
[9]	Motivation	-0.134	0.020	-0.046	-0.082	-0.018	0.009	-0.105	-0.059

4 Main Findings

In our study, we employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS v.4 software (Ringle et al., 2022) to estimate our model. Based on the guidelines by Hair et al. (2011), we opted for PLS-SEM due to the relatively small sample size and the presence of variables with non-normal distributions. In such cases, PLS-SEM is recommended over CB-SEM (Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling) for its robustness and ability to handle non-normal data more effectively. Following the guidelines provided by Hair et al. (2011) we used PLS-SEM because the sample size is relatively low. Moreover, some of the variables present a nonnormal distribution and under those circumstances, the use of PLS-SEM over CB_SEM is preferred. PLS-SEM estimates latent variables as precise linear combinations of observed measures, operating on the assumption that all measured variance is valuable and can be effectively explained within the model. PLS models are analyzed and interpreted in two stages: (a) assessment and reliability of the measurement model; and (b) testing of the structural model (Hulland, 1999). We assessed the adequacy of the measurement model by examining individual item reliabilities, and convergent and discriminant validity. We first assessed individual item reliability by examining the loadings of the measures on their respective constructs. Values between .50 and .70 are accepted if acceptable values are obtained on other indices (internal consistency reliability) (Hair, Sarstedt, Pieper, & Ringle, 2012; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012). Examination of the initial measurement model revealed that two had loadings of less than 0.5. These two items with poor loadings were excluded from subsequent analysis. Appendix A provides the final list of the individual items used in the analysis, their loadings, means, and standard deviations. Overall, these statistics are above the cut-off suggested, and indicate that all of our items demonstrate good individual item reliability. The indexes are the following: (i) Cronbach's alpha: Social cynicism = 0.784; Social Media Dependency = 0.898; (ii) Composite reliability (rho_a): Social cynicism = 0.781; Social Media Dependency = 0.905; (iii) Composite

reliability (rho_c): Social cynicism = 0.827; Social Media Dependency = 0.911. We examined the structural model for collinearity: all the predictor constructs had a VIF below 5. We therefore concluded that there was no collinearity. We considered Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which is a measure of the model fit, to assess its efficacy. SRMR values close to zero denote a small degree of covariance discrepancies, which allows them to be indicative of an acceptable fit (e.g., Hu & Bentler 1999; Hwang & Takane, 2014; McDonald & Ho, 2002). Our model reported an SRMR of 0.088, suggesting a good level of fit. The sign and significance of the path coefficients are used to assess nomological validity. A bootstrapping "sampling with replacement" method was used to assess the statistical significance of the parameter estimates. Standard errors were computed on the basis of 500 bootstrapping runs. Figure 1 presents the results of the direct structural model while Figure 2 presents the results of the moderated structural model.

The results indicate that, in line with Hypothesis 1, societal cynicism has a positive effect on SMD (in both models, with $p < 0.01$). The results suggest that individuals with high societal cynicism have a higher dependency on the use of Social Media. We can infer that this represents a way for them to gain a basic understanding of themselves and the social environment.

We find strong support for hypothesis H2a: the direct impact of Facebook is positive and significant (in both models, with $p < 0.01$), while the interaction Societal cynicism x Facebook is negative and significant (with $p < 0.05$). We find moderate support for hypothesis H2b: the direct impact of the use of YouTube is not significant (in both models, with $p > 0.10$), while the interaction Societal cynicism x YouTube is positive and slightly significant (with $p < 0.10$). Pertaining to the control variables, results show that Motivation is positive and significant in explaining Social Media dependency, while Age is negative and significant. Age has a negative effect on SMD due to reduced novelty seeking, shifting priorities, and differences between digital natives and immigrants.

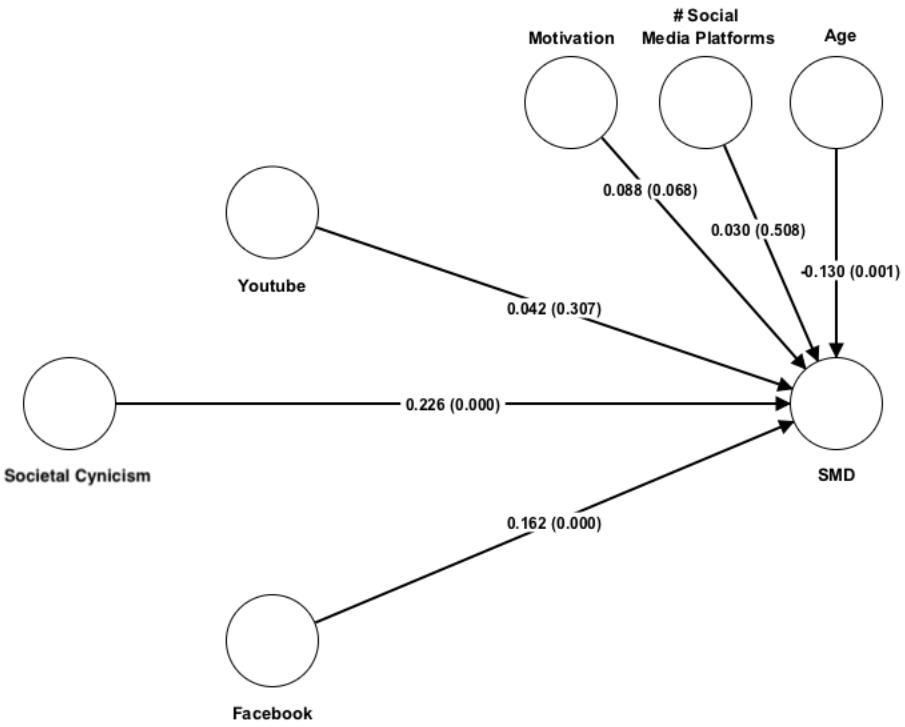

Figure 1. Results of the Direct Model Using PLS-SEM (p-values in Parenthesis)

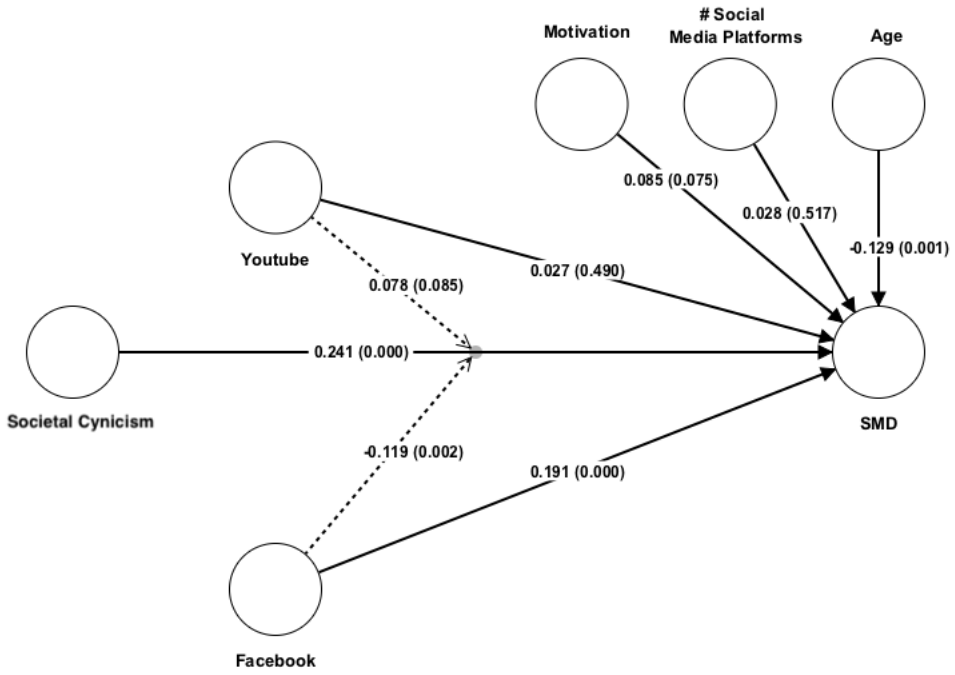

Figure 2. Results of the Moderated Model Using PLS-SEM (p-values in parenthesis)

We also made sensitivities tests: the effects of Societal cynicism, Facebook usage, and YouTube usage on SMD may be contingent on the age and gender of an individual. We conducted sensitivity analyses for different groups of individuals. We tested sensitivity by estimating the direct and moderated with two sub-samples of individuals based on their gender. The results show that our conclusions about the effects of Societal cynicism, Facebook usage, and YouTube usage on Social Media across different genders are unchanged. This finding confirms that our study is not sensitive to gender differences. The results of direct and moderated models are reported in Appendix B.

5 Discussion

In this section, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our work. This paper combines a specific social axiom construct (Leung et al., 2002) with the Media System Dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). Particularly, it investigates the role of Societal cynicism in affecting SMD, analyzing the moderating effect of the usage of two Social Media platforms providing a different set of functionalities: Facebook and YouTube. It develops and validates a research model, shedding some light on the investigation of the dependence phenomena in the context of Social Media. Moreover, the paper explores the moderation effect of the usage of two specific Social Media that present different functionalities (i.e. Facebook and YouTube) on the relationship between the Societal cynicism trait and SMD.

Our results demonstrate that societal cynicism has a positive effect on SMD. This is explained as individuals use Social Media platforms to carry out a *context analysis* of their lives, with the purpose of positioning themselves in comparison to other users and the event belonging to the social environment. This finds support in the literature that considers societal cynicism as the motivation for both acting with people (believing in them or defending them) and nurturing their level of satisfaction (Leung et al., 2007), as well as psychological distress and emotional rumination (Chen et al., 2006; Sun et al., 2023).

In addition, we demonstrated that there is an intricate relationship between societal cynicism and SMD, as a result of the interplay of skepticism, information-seeking behavior, and the desire for validation. However, a consideration worth a proper focus on is that Social Media platforms are mostly used to “compare and despair” (Stallings, n.d., p. 20). They are creating and providing and spreading the same cultural cynicism conceptualized by Wallace (2009) for the postmodern television industry, showing that although the interaction person-technology is profoundly bonded, 30 years later their evolution still provides the same results: a pessimist view of people.

Our theoretical contributions are trifold. First, we contribute to the social axiom theory by exploring the role of individual culture on IT behavior. Second, we contribute to furthering the application of MSD theory by exploring the antecedents of MSD. Previous studies analyzed the effects of MSD on other variables such as continuance intention to use (e.g. TV shopping or online consumer activities) (Alcañiz et al., 2006; Carillo et al., 2017; Grant et al., 1991; Patwardhan & Yang, 2003). Differently, this work belongs to the set of contributions exploring the role of media dependency as a dependent variable (Park et al., 2013). In addition, to the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first study that identifies the antecedents of Media System Dependency studying the micro-foundations of the relations that link individuals to the usage of Social Media. Moreover, the paper creates a link between MSD and social axioms theory enriching our understanding of the role of individual beliefs in affecting online behavior.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on the role of platform functionalities (Kietzmann et al., 2011) demonstrating that strategic decisions on which functionalities to implement in platforms impact the relationship between individual behavior and their attitude towards Social Media dependency. There is a significant stream of research focusing on platform architecture and functionalities. Such studies emphasized the importance of competitive dynamics (Cennamo & Santalo, 2013; Cusumano & Gawer, 2002), transaction costs (Hagiu, 2014), a network effect (Eisenmann et al., 2005; Rysman, 2009), and innovation (Boudreau, 2010) for establishing superior market position. However, our study takes a different perspective by reflecting on the potential for increasing the market position of Social Media platforms by leveraging the values and beliefs of individuals.

As practical contributions, this paper seeks to explore how different personal values affect Social Media dependency based on the main functionalities of the platforms. For instance, our results suggest that individuals with high societal cynicism exhibit a higher dependency on the use of Social Media. Furthermore, the direct impact of the use of Facebook on SMD is positive and significant, while the direct impact of YouTube is not significant. These findings can thus provide valuable insights for platform designers, policymakers, and users. Platform designers can gain awareness of the effects of societal cynicism combined with different functionalities of Social Media platforms, allowing them to modify platform characteristics according to the target audience. Recognizing the significance of social axioms on Social Media platforms, policymakers should consider the role of culture in influencing individual behavior. Additionally, this paper provides useful information to companies designing digital platforms that are relevant to the well-being of users and aimed at implementing preventive actions against the phenomena of IT addiction of individuals adhering to the social axiom of cynicism.

This research has also some limitations. It is important to acknowledge that this study focused mainly on one specific class of users – people between 20 and 29 years old – that could be less representative of the entire population of Social Media users. Moreover, the sample is composed mainly of Italians and the survey administered did not control the usage of each social network, so we had to rely on secondary sources to estimate the use of each platform. Furthermore, the survey did not take into account different patterns of platform usage beyond the number of hours per day. Future studies may benefit from exploring other measures of usage, such as the frequency of logins and the duration of each session per week (Burton-Jones & Straub, 2006). Investigating the stability of the results with a more representative population (such as enlarging age and nationality) using Social Media (Kemp, 2023), would help to assess the extent to which the results can be generalized. Also, future studies could provide additional tests to evaluate the moderation effects (e.g. Hayes' model). In addition, future research should be conducted comparing our findings in emergency contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic in which the use of the Social Media has considerably increased. The emergency generated by the pandemic has forced people home and it is likely it affected social dependency.

Finally, this study focuses only on the two most widespread and used platforms (i.e. Facebook and YouTube). Ideally, future studies could also track the role of other platforms as well as take into consideration the different dimensions of SMD. We investigated and modeled SMD as a single construct but we can delve into the different dimensions of SMD modeling it as a higher-order construct to capture also the relationships between lower-order constructs. We hope that the advances made in this paper will stimulate further reflections on how individual beliefs can influence the dependency perception of Social Media.

6 Conclusion

The current Social Media landscape is characterized by constant changes concerning the number of players and platforms, with their features emerging in the marketplace. Additionally, the number of Internet users increases year by year along with the time people spent on Social Media. Among various streams of Social Media research, studies focusing on technology dependency have gained notoriety as they aim to understand an important aspect of human behavior in relation to technology usage. Furthermore, a few of them recently investigated the effects of generalized beliefs about the world on technology dependency. This study contributes to this stream of research by examining the effect of societal cynicism, characterized by a negative view of the world, on the utilitarian and goal-oriented social media dependency, differentiating the usage of two social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube) equipped with a different set of functionalities. The results enrich our understanding of the role of individual beliefs in affecting online behavior as well as how different combinations of platform functionalities can mitigate or enhance this effect. Despite some limitations, this research offers insights for policy makers, decision makers, practitioners, and platform owners in designing, developing, and configuring a Social Media platform as well as for regulating their usage considering the role of culture in affecting individual behavior.

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This paper is dedicated to our esteemed co-author, Francesca Masciarelli, whose recent passing has deeply saddened us. Francesca was a distinguished member of the University of Chieti-Pescara's faculty and a valued colleague, friend, and dedicated scholar. Francesca was renowned not only for her academic excellence but also for her vivacious spirit and love of life. Her ironic wit and joyous demeanor brought inspiration and happiness to everyone around her. Her presence will be profoundly missed by her family, friends, colleagues, and the countless students whose lives she touched. We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Francesca and share memorable moments with her. It was a true pleasure. Francesca, your memory will forever remain in our hearts and minds.

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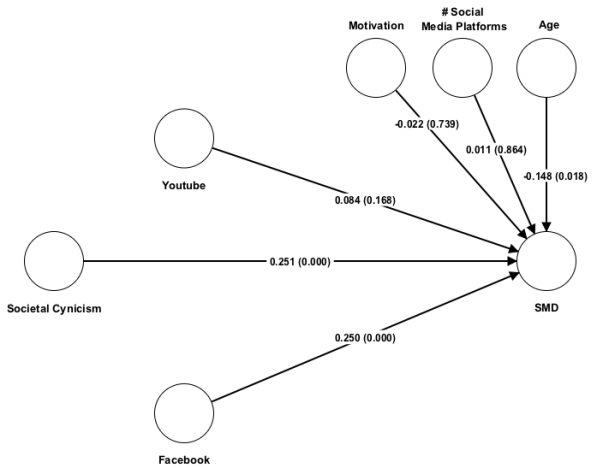
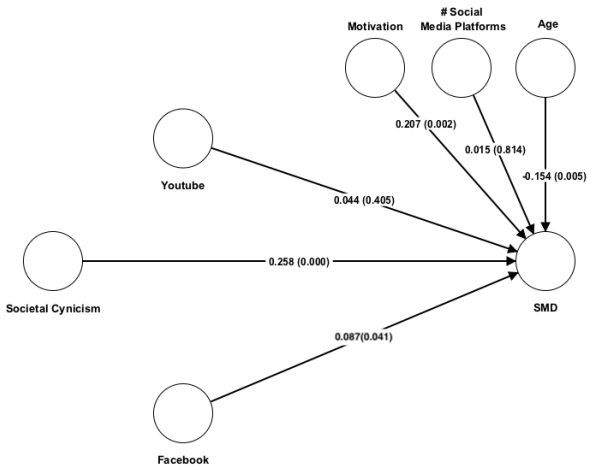
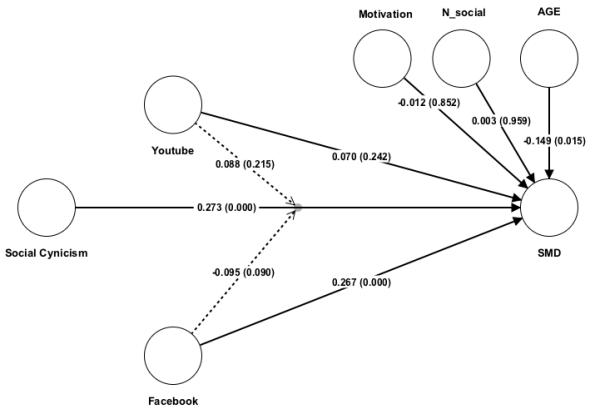
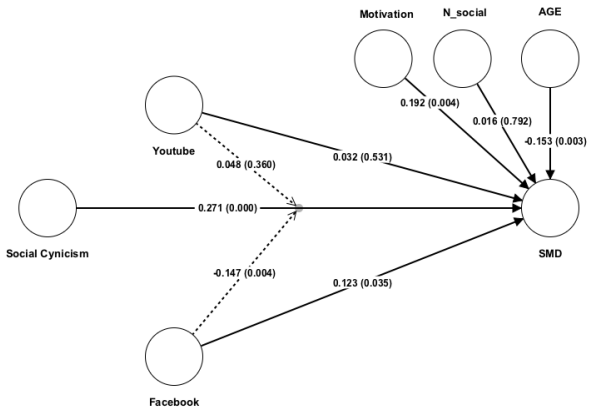
Appendix A: Items Used in the Analysis

	Factor Loadings	Mean	St.dev
Social Media Dependency			
In your daily life, how useful/helpful are social networks to:			
Gain insight into why you do some of the things you do.	0.795	2.251	1.076
Imagine what you will be like when you grow older.	0.677	1.963	1.095
Observe how others cope with problems or situations like yours.	0.723	2.572	1.162
Discover better ways to communicate with others.	0.620	3.121	1.143
Think about how to act with friends, relatives, or people you work with.	0.761	2.387	1.161
Get ideas about how to approach others in important or difficult situations.	0.740	2.315	1.114
Decide where to go for services such as health, financial, or household.	0.612	2.481	1.117
Figure out what to buy.	0.562	2.949	1.149
Plan where to go for evening and weekend activities.	0.547	3.359	1.151
Unwind after a hard day or week.	0.718	3.764	1.065
Relax when you are by yourself.	0.708	3.727	1.072
Have something to do when nobody else is around.	0.612	3.764	1.074
Give you something to do with your friends.	0.501	2.103	1.076
Have fun with family or friends.	0.504	2.133	1.089
Be a part of events you enjoy without having to be there.	0.575	2.492	1.247
Societal cynicism			
Rate from 1 to 5 the agreement with the following sentences			
Powerful people tend to exploit others	0.538	3.598	1.070
Kind-hearted people are easily bullied	0.566	1.842	1.045
Power and status make people arrogant	0.519	1.794	1.099
Kind-hearted people usually suffer losses	0.608	2.804	1.164
Old people are usually stubborn and biased	0.696	3.347	1.257
Young people are impulsive and unreliable	0.532	1.738	0.960
It is easier to succeed if one knows how to take shortcuts	0.592	3.158	1.101
Females need a better appearance than males	0.551	3.018	1.196
It is rare to see a happy ending in real life	0.546	2.717	1.127
People will stop working hard after they secure a comfortable life	0.536	3.140	1.240
To care about societal affairs only brings trouble for yourself	0.549	3.386	1.119
Most people hope to be repaid after they help others	0.584	3.011	1.212
Harsh laws can make people obey	0.531	2.767	1.265
The various social institutions in society are biased toward the rich	0.532	3.150	1.081
Humility is dishonesty	0.511	3.217	1.147

Appendix B: Sensitivity Analysis

Results of the direct model using PLS-SEM (p-values in parenthesis)	Results of the moderated model using PLS-SEM (p-values in parenthesis)
Male sub-sample 	
Female sub-sample 	

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