

Swipe, Like, Repeat: Towards a Fit-based Theory of Implicit Motives in Social Media Addiction

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Abstract

In this paper, we use motive disposition theory to explore the role that implicit motives play in eliciting social media (SM) addiction. In doing so, we propose that individuals' implicit motives—namely affiliation, power, and achievement—interact with the functionalities of an SM platform to elicit SM use. Through a theoretical literature review, we propose five perceived social media functionalities, namely: sharing, relationships, communication, persona, and presence. We posit that as the fit between one's implicit motives and a platform's perceived functionalities increases, the motivation to use the platform increases—a pattern that puts individuals at risk of SM addiction by continuously luring their attention to the platform. We also propose that emotion regulation moderates this relationship. Given rising rates of SM addiction, our theory offers new insights into the technical- and human-factors that put individuals at risk of this dark-side SM phenomenon which can reduce life satisfaction and well-being.

Keywords: Social media, social media addiction, IT dark side, motive disposition theory, social media functionality

1. Introduction

The impacts of social media (SM) on society are undeniable. From Facebook to TikTok, social media has not only changed how we find information and connect with others but also played a key role in global issues like monitoring the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the benefits of these technologies, SM is not without risks. Due to its reinforcing nature and activation of the brain's reward system through dopamine release, social media can incite excessive usage and, in some cases, addiction. As with substance abuse addictions, SM addiction has been closely linked to anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances [1, 2, 3]. Not surprisingly, amid rising SM use, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to understanding the effects of SM on its users [3].

According to a 2021 review (c.f., [3]), scholars have employed diverse theoretical lenses, frameworks, and methodologies to explore the potential causes and effects of SM addiction. Despite this, there is a relative paucity of research focusing how specific SM features contribute to addiction [3]. While certain SM features have been found to contribute to SM addiction [1, 3], and with SM platforms explicitly designed to be “wildly addictive” [4], it is not only critical to understand which SM features and functionalities drive use, but how these elements interact with individuals' personality to influence SM use and addiction.

To explore this phenomenon, we propose a new fit-based theory that explains SM use and the risk of addiction through the lens of motive disposition theory (MDT). Through a theoretical literature review, we first identify and define five perceived SM functionalities: relationships, sharing, communication, persona, and presence. We then leverage MDT to explain how the “Big Three” of implicit motives—the need for affiliation, power, and achievement—elicit SM use when perceived SM functionalities offer incentives aligned with a user's motive disposition. By offering the potential to fulfill a user's implicit motives, we posit that as this alignment (or “fit”) between one's needs and the platform's perceived functionalities increases, the motivation to use the platform increases—a pattern that may put individuals at risk for SM addiction by continuously luring their attention to the platform. To explain differences in the risk of SM addiction, we introduce emotion-regulation [5] as an antecedent of SM use and a moderator of its relationship with addiction.

Our work offers various contributions. First, we define a new, multidimensional construct capturing the perceived functionalities of SM platforms, namely the perceived SM functionalities (PSMF) construct. Second, by theorizing the interaction, or fit, between this construct and a user's implicit motives, we help to close knowledge gaps regarding the impact(s) of SM functionalities, and related features, on SM addiction. Third, we contribute to the SM literature by adopting MDT, an under-utilized theoretical perspective rooted

in implicit motives and nonconscious preferences. Finally, we answer calls for research exploring factors for reducing IT addiction (c.f., [1]) by integrating emotion-regulation into our theorizing. In doing so, we further demonstrate the role that adaptive personality traits play in SM addiction.

Our paper is structured accordingly: First, we introduce our phenomena of interest: social media use and addiction. Next, MDT is presented, followed by our theoretical development. We conclude with a review of our research contributions, limitations, and next steps.

2. Social media (SM) use and addiction

SM is a composite of Web 2.0 technologies used to facilitate interpersonal communication and collaboration via the creation and sharing of content by users [6, 7]. Despite the pervasive role that SM plays in our lives, SM usage—or the ways in which users engage with SM—is not constant across people. Users' preferences may vary depending on when they log in, how much time they spend, the intensity of their use, and their intentions. These characteristics can be referred to as an SM usage pattern. Recent research suggests that SM usage patterns can impact users [8]. For instance, Verduyn et al. [9] found that 'passive Facebook usage'—involving the consumption of information, like scrolling through newsfeeds without direct exchanges—increases envy and reduces affective well-being while 'active Facebook usage'—involving direct exchanges with others, like commenting on posts—did not reduce affective well-being.

Recently, there has been an increased effort to understand maladjusted SM use patterns like addiction and problematic use [2, 3]. Yet, to date, there are no universally accepted conceptualizations of the various patterns of maladjusted SM use. Moreover, the term problematic SM use has been adopted as a catchall term for diverse types of maladjusted use patterns making it difficult to differentiate the underlying causes of such behaviors and their impacts [10, 11, 3]. In this paper, we adopt Vaghefi et al.'s [12] conceptualization of technology addiction to define SM addiction as a *user's psychological state of maladaptive dependency on SM that involves engaging in compulsive and excessive SM use despite significant adverse effects*.

Unlike excessive SM use—often defined in terms of intensity or hours of use—addicted SM use reflects a “disorder by which detrimental effects occur as a result of preoccupation and compulsion to excessively engage in [SM] platforms despite negative consequences” [13, p. 1]. Addicted SM use patterns are also characterized by SM seeking and use behaviors that likely “take place at the expense of other important activities [14]”. Our conceptualization of SM addiction is aligned with others

from the IS discipline (c.f., [15]), as well as definitions of other IT-based addictions like computer [16] and online game-addiction [14]. In such definitions, a loss of control, compulsion, preoccupation with the behavior, and adverse consequences resulting from the technology use are all key elements [1, 17].

3. Towards a theory of social media use

Many theories have been used to explain and predict the behaviors and usage patterns of SM users. Psychological theories of motivation like Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Conservation of Resource Theory (CORT) (c.f., [1, 18, 19]), as well as media theories of motivation like the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (c.f., [20]) have been leveraged to explain SM use, as well as negative outcomes. While such research is valuable, to date, research has been dominated by a focus on *explicit* motives. In this paper, we adopt motive disposition theory (MDT) which, unlike motivational theories used in prior SM research, acknowledges that both *explicit* and *implicit* motives play a role in shaping behavior.

3.1. Motive disposition theory (MDT)

MDT is a psychological framework addressing humans' needs for achievement, affiliation, and power. It suggests that individuals have innate tendencies or learned orientations towards certain environmental incentives. Specifically, MDT posits that individuals exhibit stable differences across their achievement, affiliation, and power motives, which shape whether they perceive social, competitive, or performance-based contexts as rewarding or not [21]. To explain individuals' behaviours, MDT distinguishes between two types of motivational systems: an *explicit* system which functions at a *conscious* level, and an *implicit* system which operates outside of one's conscious awareness and control. Unlike explicit motives which change over time and circumstances, and are shaped by explicit instructions [22], implicit motives are a set of enduring, *unconscious* preferences that individuals innately possess towards certain types of incentives inherent in situations [23]. Simply put, implicit motives reflect affective preferences, unconsciously shaped by emotions and feelings rather than rational analysis.

Explicit and implicit motives also differ in their behavioral impact. Implicit motives are associated with *spontaneous* and *uncontrolled behavior*, whereas explicit motives are associated with behavior that is “subject to conscious thought and deliberation, such as self-reflective appraisals, judgments, and deliberate choices” [22, p. 3]. As such, implicit motives and, by extension MDT, are especially useful to study

problematic and addicted SM use patterns which are characterized by impulsive and compulsive behaviors respectively. Impulsive behaviors are actions that are quick and lack forethought and conscious judgment [24], while compulsive behaviors are actions performed in response to obsessions, “less steered by one’s will and more by an uncontrollable internal force” [25]. Given the lack of control and consciousness inherent of such behaviors, examining the role of implicit motives in SM addiction is of theoretical and practical relevance [12].

3.2. Motivated action and implicit motives

The study of motivated action often involves understanding why individuals choose to engage in certain behaviors, the processes through which needs and goals influence behavior, and how factors like emotional experiences, rewards, and punishments, can influence motivation. Per Heckhausen and Heckhausen [26], motivated action occurs when a psychological force—like an explicit or implicit motive—stimulates an individual to act in a way that helps them to achieve a certain goal or fulfill a certain need. *In general, three implicit motives characterize individuals' preferences, namely the need for affiliation, power, and achievement.*

The implicit **affiliation** motive is defined as having an unconscious desire or concern for “establishing and maintaining positive relationships with others” [27, p. 2]. Individuals high in the affiliation motive tend to value interpersonal relationships and are driven by a need to belong, be accepted by others, and form strong social connections. Individuals with a high affiliation motive enjoy companionate and community activities, as well as friendly and nurturing acts. The implicit affiliation motive can lead individuals to seek out social interactions, feel happier when they are with others, and experience greater satisfaction in cooperative situations.

The implicit **power** motive is defined as an unconscious need to have control, impact, or influence over others [23]. Individuals high in this motive tend to value situations in which they can exert influence on others as they ensure their superiority and control [26]. Conversely, such individuals find situations where they cannot “exert influence or are even under the control of others” to be unpleasant [26, p. 338]. The central incentive of the power motive is the perceived potential to experience social impact and strength. A power motive can result in behaviors such as: giving unsolicited advice; being concerned about the impressions of others (prestige); attempting to influence others’ thinking or insisting on making a point; as well as trying to elicit a strong reaction in others [23, 26].

The implicit **achievement** motive is an unconscious concern for achieving success and exhibiting competence at a high standard of excellence. Individuals

high in this motive strive for success in competitive situations and tend to persist in the face of difficulty. They derive satisfaction from accomplishing tasks and have a strong desire to do so efficiently. Individuals high in this motive pursue challenges and seek out opportunities for achievement. They tend to gravitate towards situations that allow them to demonstrate their skills, excel in tasks, and achieve their goals [23, 27].

Per MDT, individuals will “differ in the types of incentives and situations they find rewarding (and thus capable of inciting action)” [21]. For the achievement motive, it is situations that offer feedback about one's performance against a standard of excellence, for the power motive it is the opportunity to influence or exert impact on others and/or one’s environment, and for the affiliation motive it is the opportunity to engage in positive social interactions. Importantly, the strength of each implicit motive will determine which situations are of incentive value to an individual [23].

3.2.1. A situation-based approach to behavioral motivation. An individual’s implicit motives are not the only factor influencing an individual’s motivation to pursue action. An explanatory model of action must account for the opportunities and constraints of a person’s situational context. Every outcome “that a situation can promise or signal to an individual is called an ‘incentive’ and has ‘demand characteristics’ for an appropriate action. Incentives may be associated with the action itself, its outcome, or various consequences of an action outcome” [26, p. 4]. Heckhausen and Heckhausen’s [26] General Model of Motivated Action adopts a situation-based approach to behavioral motivation which posits that behavior is not just a result of personal traits or inherent tendencies, but that behavior can be significantly influenced by an individual’s immediate situation or circumstances. Simply put, action is determined by the alignment (or “fit”) between a person’s needs, goals, and motives and their situation. This interaction is depicted in **Figure 1** by the ⊗ symbol.

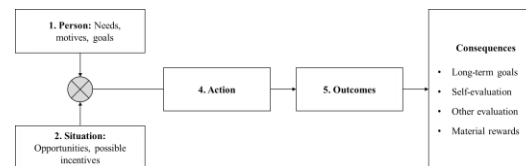


Figure 1: Heckhausen and Heckhausen’s (2018) general model of motivated action

When exploring actions, focusing on the situation, and not just the person, ensures that behavior can be properly identified while allowing researchers to unpack seemingly “common and otherwise unremarkable behaviors that have wide generalizability as caused by a specific situational context” [26, pp. 5-6]. Over the next

section of this paper, we introduce SM platforms as the *situational context* within which a user may be motivated to action based on the incentives (*i.e., the functionalities*) offered by the platform. To do so, we begin by defining a set of perceived SM functionalities.

3.3. Perceived social media functionalities

Functionality refers to whether a design helps a user to meet their needs and goals. Various scholars recognize that SM platforms tend to be characterized by an overarching set of functionalities. For instance, Kietzmann et al. [7] suggest that all SM platforms are comprised of seven functional building blocks that enable and constrain users. Per Kietzmann et al., different SM platforms place a different focus on the building blocks of identity, conversations, groups, reputation, relationships, reputation, and presence. As an example, LinkedIn would be considered as ‘identity’ focused while YouTube would be ‘sharing’ focused. In this paper, we focus on defining a set of platform-agnostic perceived SM functionalities; and, following Kietzmann et al., we recognize that the prominence of each functionality may differ across platforms.

Importantly, while both functionalities and features help to understand the incentives offered by SM platforms, we use the term **social media functionality** to refer to *what* a social media platform can support a user in doing (to meet their specific needs and goals) whereas the term **feature** refers to *how* a functionality is supported. For example, if we consider “relationship development” to be a functionality of Facebook, then we would consider the “Add as friend” button on a person’s profile page to be the supporting feature of the functionality. We focus on functionalities rather than features as the latter are more ephemeral in nature than functionalities. Moreover, features can be very specific to platforms whereas functionalities are higher-order and thus more generalizable across SM platforms. To derive our perceived social media functionality (PSMF) construct, we conducted a theoretical literature review.

3.3.1. Literature review methodology. A *theoretical review* aims to create a structured understanding of existing research on a particular topic. It goes beyond summarizing prior studies; instead, it categorizes, organizes, and analyzes past studies to develop new theories or enhance existing ones [28]. The goal of our review was to synthesize the various streams of work on social media functions, features, and affordances to generate a new construct (PSMF) and related conceptual model with a set of falsifiable research propositions. Best practices for such reviews were adopted to ensure methodological rigor (c.f., [28, 29]).

We searched the IS Senior Scholars' List of Premier Journals (the Basket of 11) using four terms: social media function*, social media dimension*, social media feature*, and social media affordance*. While our focus is on understanding perceived functionalities, the term ‘social media affordance’ was included as a search term following Karahanna et al. [18] to ensure adequate coverage of the SM literature. Specifically, their search strategy generated a set of SM affordances which relied on a comprehensive review of the SM literature. They identified studies that explicitly identified affordances, as well as those that focused on perceived IT features and SM functionalities (c.f., [7]).

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria
- SM features, functions, and/or affordances are defined
Exclusion criteria
- Social media is not a central phenomenon (e.g., the term SM only appears in the references of the paper)
- SM features, functions, and/or affordances are not discussed
- Enterprise SM use by organizations to conduct business
- Methodology focused papers where SM is simply a context or example for application

Search terms were applied to the full text and our search period spanned 20 years (from 2000-2023). A total of 71 articles were initially retrieved. We then began by removing duplicates, editorials, and special intros from the sample. Next, we applied our inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1) to the remaining 61 articles. This process left us with a total of 45 papers.

Table 2: Definitions and mapping of PSMF to literature

Perceived SM functionalities Dimensions and definitions	Selected sources
Relationship: The extent to which a user considers the platform allows for the development of relationships with other users and groups of users by allowing one to articulate and traverse connections within the platform.	[6, 7, 18, 31, 36, 38, 39, 42]
Sharing: The extent to which a user considers that the platform allows for the reception, exchange, and controlled distribution of varied media content.	[6, 7, 18, 35, 38, 39, 42]
Communication: The extent to which a user considers that the platform allows for them to generate discussions and to engage in conversations with other users on the platform.	[6, 7, 18, 30, 38, 42]
Persona: The extent to which a user considers that the platform allows for the self-expression, discovery, and protection of a user’s identity through user and network generated content linked to their profile.	[6, 7, 18, 30, 31, 35, 36, 38, 41, 42]
Presence: The extent to which a user considers that the platform allows for the indication of availability (literal or virtual) in the present or in the future despite possibly being inactive or invisible.	[7, 18, 36, 38, 39, 42]

One researcher and one research assistant then reviewed each article with the aim of extracting the definitions of the functions, features, and affordances. Each researcher grouped similar functions, features, and affordances together. Groupings were then reviewed and discussed to arrive at a final set of functionalities. Through this process, we identified and defined five

perceived functionalities, namely the perceived relationship, sharing, communication, persona, and presence functionalities (See **Table 2**). These functionalities form our multi-dimensional perceived social media functionality (PSMF) construct which we define as a user’s awareness that an SM platform is designed to serve a general ‘social’ purpose.

With the concepts of implicit motives and PSMF defined, we now introduce our theoretical model (see **Figure 2**). By leveraging MDT and the general model of motivated action as a lens, we propose that SM use is motivated by the fit between an individual’s needs (as expressed through their implicit motives) and the functionalities an SM platform is perceived to offer.

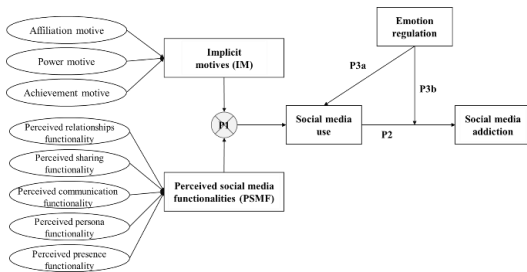


Figure 2: Proposed conceptual model

More specifically, as the fit between one’s implicit motives and the perceived functionality of a platform increases, the motivation to use the platform increases leading to increased SM use (this *interaction* is depicted by \otimes in **Figure 2**). We further propose that as implicitly motivated SM use increases, so will the likelihood of experiencing SM addiction (P2). Finally, we propose that a user’s capacity for emotion-regulation will negatively affect the SM use (P3a) and will moderate the link between their SM use and SM addiction (P3b). We next discuss each proposition.

3.4. Implicit motives and PSMF

Users engage with SM through the functionalities and enabling features offered by the platform. Adopting a situation-based approach to SM use, we propose that perceived SM functionalities can incentivize action—in this case, SM use—by offering the potential to fulfill the user’s implicit motives. Per MDT, an incentive is “a situational characteristic that, based on previous learning experiences, is associated with the possibility of satisfying a motive and, as a result, experiencing positive and rewarding affect (feelings of pride, strength, interpersonal attachment, etc.)” [23]. In this regard, implicit motives interact with natural incentives to elicit behavior. Natural incentives are those that

address basic needs. For example, the perceived relationship developing functionality can incentivize SM users with a high affiliation motive. Specifically, a social contact incentive—like the ‘Add friend’ feature on a platform—can allow a user to create a new relationship leading to feelings of love or the experience emotions like joy, happiness, and pleasure [23].

Importantly, since implicit motives are developed from emotional experiences during early childhood before the development of verbal abilities, they are more likely to be aroused by nonverbal incentives and to trigger non-conscious behaviors [23]. Notably, SM offers an array of verbal and non-verbal forms of content that incentivize a user’s implicit motives. The perceived possibilities of non-verbal content—like images, GIFs, photos, and emojis—can signal a fit between one’s implicit motives and the perceived SM functionality thus leading to action. As such, we propose:

P1: *The more extensive the fit between one’s implicit motives (affiliation, power, and/or achievement) and PSMF (relationships, sharing, communication, persona, and/or presence), the higher SM use¹.*

Given the multi-dimensional nature of the PSMF construct, a detailed discussion of each implicit motive and its fit with each functionality is necessary. To enhance clarity and ease of understanding, throughout our discussion we provide examples of features supporting the functionalities on various platforms.

3.4.1. Implicit affiliation motive and PSMF. An implicit affiliation motive is defined as an unconscious drive or desire to create, maintain, or restore positive and harmonious relationships with other individuals [23]. Various functionalities and related features can act as an incentive to the affiliation motive. Firstly, by allowing users to make and maintain social connections online, the *perceived relationship functionality* can be a strong incentive for individuals with an affiliation motive. The incentive is well-supported by the literature [30, 7, 18, 31, 32]. For instance, Bergmark et al. [33] found that SM increases net social interaction suggesting that SM can satisfy affiliation-intimacy needs that may have gone unmet if not for the use of SM. This finding is supported by research indicating that lonely people are more likely to use Facebook to communicate with individuals they do not know offline [34]. In addition to allowing users to build and interact with others, platforms may allow users to define different degrees of relationships [32]. For example, on some platforms, users may have the choice to ‘follow’ another user or to “add them as a friend”. Relatedly,

¹ Following Burton-Jones and Straub [57], we view “use” as a complex construct that can be conceptualized along a range of dimensions (e.g., duration, features used, etc.). In this paper, we define social media use in terms of frequency and duration of use. This allows us to differentiate SM use from SM addiction, where the latter involves both excessive use and

compulsive use, comes at the expense of other activities, and results in significant negative consequences. Frequency of use is also a well-recognized antecedent of IT addiction in IS research [1].

both Facebook and Instagram users have the option to designate certain users as part of their “Close Friends list” which leads the platform algorithm to prioritize interactions with these users.

Other perceived functionalities and related features may incentivize the implicit affiliation motive. For instance, the *perceived sharing functionality* may incentivize users by enabling the creation and distribution of content that is aimed at helping others. In such cases, users will aim to share content with high practical utility [35, 30]. Users may also share or exchange content with the aim of feeling closer to others as well as connecting with others who have similar interests or with groups of individuals to which they wish to be affiliated [30, 36, 32]. This argument is supported by Baek et al.’s [37] study on the motivations behind sharing links on Facebook. Specifically, Baek et al. found a relationship between information sharing and interpersonal utility as defined as the motivation “To meet people with same interests as mine” and “to meet people with similar backgrounds” [37, p. 2245]. Per the MDT literature, connecting with others with similar interests creates opportunities for companionate activities and other nurturing acts is consistent with the affiliation motive. Thus, Baek et al.’s findings suggest an underlying affiliation motive to link sharing.

The *perceived communication functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit affiliation motive by allowing them to engage in dialogue with other users. Using the conversation functions and related features, users often exchange personal stories and information while choosing to share more about themselves to gain acceptance. Thus, engaging in dialogue can enable users to create relationships, to gain a sense of belonging and community, as well as to feel close to others [18, 38, 39, 32]. Relatedly, users may leverage the perceived communication function to express their emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger) to get support and advice from others; they may also engage in conversations to give support, to encourage others, and to let them know that ‘someone cares about them’ [30].

The *perceived persona functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit affiliation motive by allowing them to share intimate thoughts and feelings with others through their profiles or status updates [39, 1, 38]. For example, one might express their solidarity with a cause by changing their profile photo or hash-tagging their profile. Individuals may also leverage different privacy settings to reveal more personal information to those whom they are more intimately connected [40, 41]. For instance, on Facebook, many users choose privacy settings that allow ‘Friends’ to see more personal information like their birthdate, relationship status, etc. Relatedly, Lehrer et al. [42] have found that users leverage varying degrees of

ephemerality embedded in platforms such as Snapchat to express themselves and their persona in an honest, yet unrestricted manner—knowing that content shared will not remain attached to their profile permanently.

Finally, the *perceived presence functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit affiliation motive by providing users with the opportunity to indicate their presence in accordance with their desired level of intimacy for their online relationships. For example, individuals may choose to ‘appear online’ on personal platforms, such as Facebook, but refrain from doing so on a professional platform like LinkedIn [40, 7, 18].

3.4.2. Implicit power motive and PSMF. An implicit power motive is an unconscious drive or desire to influence others, to take charge, and to have an impact on one’s surroundings [23]. Various functionalities and related features can act as an incentive to the power motive. For instance, regarding the *relationship development functionality*, prior work has suggested that individuals with a high-power motive may choose to have a disproportionately high number of friends on SM to impress and influence others rather than to sustain meaningful affiliations [43]. The functionality can also be an incentive to the implicit power motive by allowing a user to create a community and/or content aimed at eliciting a strong emotional reaction in others. For example, activists/celebrities/leaders often leverage this functionality to form their own communities and to influence their followers. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, many celebrities used relationships with their SM audience to launch a fundraising campaign to support less fortunate women in need of legal support.

The *perceived sharing functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit power motive by allowing users to share content aimed at influencing others. For instance, Heimbach and Hinz [34] have found that users may choose to share and send content “to appear knowledgeable and smart” (p. 594). Additionally, previous work has suggested that users may leverage such functionalities to share photos displaying their offline activities as another way to impress others and to bolster one’s reputation [43, 36]. Relatedly, the flaunting of extreme wealth on Instagram—like taking selfies on private jets—is a behavioral trend motivated by the implicit power motive [44].

The *perceived communication functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit power motive by allowing them to generate, lead and/or influence online conversations and discussions. Several platforms tap into this motive through their use of badges to designate influential users [45]. For example, on Facebook, the ‘Top Contributor’ badge—which is visible to others—signals that a user has a significant impact through their activities (which can include sharing, commenting, and

conversations) within a group. Similarly, LinkedIn awards ‘Top Voices’ blue badges to users who are senior-level experts and leaders that are influential in their fields and who consistently generate high-quality content for the platform and its users. For individuals high in the implicit power motive, the visibility of such badges satisfies their desire for social recognition and status. Being labeled a top contributor implies authority and expertise, giving the user an influential role within discussions. This can increase their perceived power and control over the community’s dynamics. Relatedly, many SM platforms feature metrics such as ‘likes’ and ‘upvotes’ which can cater to the implicit power motive by providing tangible indicators of one’s influence.

The *perceived persona functionality* can also act as an incentive to the power motive. For instance, the use of status updates to express an opinion and to persuade others to adopt such opinions is a behavior aligned with the implicit power motive. As per Hu et al. [36], individuals also use social media to present images, status, and events of themselves in a preferred manner. Self-expression through status updates can also be related to the power motive when such status updates are used to display a prestigious aspect of the self [30]. For instance, one may update their LinkedIn profile with certifications to prove their knowledge and influence others’ opinions of them.

Finally, the *perceived presence functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit power motive by enabling users to indicate their presence in a context which would have a strong impact on others. For instance, one might decide to use the “check-in” feature on an SM platform to indicate their presence at event where they are serving as an emcee or competition judge [46]. Similarly, in a study of college students, Kim [49] found that many students choose to publicly check-in at a venue as they consider doing so enhances their status and reputation, while earning them respect as an online review expert.

3.4.3. Implicit achievement motive and PSMF. An implicit achievement motive is an unconscious drive or need to strive for success; such motives are characterized by a recurrent concern for excellence and the satisfaction derived from mastering challenges and attaining high standards [23]. Various functionalities can act as an incentive to this motive. For instance, users may leverage the *perceived relationship functionality* for utilitarian purposes related to excellence. For example, a user may join a professional SM platform—such as ResearchGate or LinkedIn—to gain access to knowledge, contacts, or training.

The *perceived sharing functionality* can incentivize the achievement motive by allowing for the creation, curation, and search of SM content that supports their pursuit of excellence [36]. For instance, a user may

choose to share an analysis of a topic related to their expertise. In recent years, many doctors have been creating videos to help viewers understand complex or misunderstood health issues. Some medical doctors are creating ‘reaction videos’ aimed at breaking down original content and debunking false information. Notably, a 2023 study found that adolescents consider SM as particularly important for accessing information needed to acquire new skills and knowledge, as well as to develop social competencies to overcome social obstacles like anxiety and shyness [47].

The *perceived communication functionality* may incentivize a user’s implicit achievement motive by enabling users to self-affirm or challenge their knowledge and expertise through discussion. For instance, being an active participant in various conversations (e.g., chats, forums) can provide a user with a sense of accomplishment. Similarly, engaging in ‘crowdsourcing-type discussions’ on SM can incentivize the achievement motive by enabling users to solve problems and answer questions with the goal of collectively overcoming obstacles and challenges.

Shifting our attention to the *perceived persona functionality*, this functionality may incentivize users high in the achievement motive by enabling them to earn certifications or badges which can be added to their profiles. In such cases, users driven by the achievement motive would not add these digital symbols to their profiles to hold influence over others—a behavior driven by the power motive—but rather in the hope that doing so could lead to new connections or discussions with like-minded people, potentially enhancing their ability to advance their personal pursuit of excellence.

Lastly, the *perceived presence functionality* may incentivize users with a high achievement motive by allowing them to indicate their presence at events associated with their pursuit of excellence and their need for challenge. For instance, users may choose to ‘check-in’ to a training academy, or to venues related to their occupation or work [46, 48]. Again, users driven by the achievement motive would not signal their presence as a means to establish their excellence—a behavior driven by the power motive—but rather in the hope that doing so could lead to new connections or opportunities, potentially enhancing their ability to advance their personal pursuit of excellence.

3.5. Implicitly driven SM use and addiction

In the preceding section, we developed our central proposition that SM use is in part motivated by the fit and interaction between a user’s implicit motives and the perceived functionalities of a platform. We posited that higher levels of fit between one’s implicit motives and the platforms’ perceived functionalities were

associated with higher levels of implicitly driven SM use. Where our goal is to understand what triggers the emergence of SM addiction, and the resulting impacts, it is necessary to understand how implicitly motivated behaviors differ from explicitly motivated behaviors.

Unlike explicit motives, which tend to be more controlled and deliberate, implicit motives are less controlled and rooted more in emotions. Thus, implicit behaviors tend to predict spontaneous and impulsive behaviors rather than deliberate behaviors [27]. For this reason, the interaction between a user's implicit motives and their perceptions of an SM platform's functionality (as theorized in P1) will trigger SM use that is heavily weighted in the user's emotional subjective experience, leading to impulsive use. Due to the unplanned nature of implicitly-motivated SM use, such use is likely to disrupt or even conflict with a user's explicit motives and their environment which can lead to emotional distress [49]. For instance, a user's implicit motives might drive them to use SM while at work for reasons unrelated to their job and their consciously desired goals. Implicit motives may also explain why drivers check their SM despite the obvious risks and dangers.

Importantly, the repeated triggering of an impulsive pattern of SM use can become compulsive over time. Per MDT, the "occurrence of specific behaviors in response to specific incentives is reinforced or reduced by the positive or negative consequences of the respective behavior" [27, p. 8]. When SM use is activated through affectively charged incentives, engaging with SM is pleasurable and/or perceived as improving wellbeing or alleviating personal distress. This affective experience leads the user to behave in a similar manner to re-experience the positive affect. The repeated execution of behaviors—in this case, implicitly driven SM use—to gain specific rewards reinforces the respective motive disposition [27, 50]. Thus, over time, we posit that implicitly-driven SM use patterns can become compulsive due to this reinforcement effect. Where IS use habit has been positively linked to addiction in the context of SM [50], we propose:

P2: *Higher levels of implicitly-motivated SM use will be associated with a higher likelihood of SM addiction.*

3.6. Emotion-regulation and SM addiction

An underlying tenet of MDT and our theorization is that implicit motives compel behavior at a *nonconscious* level. Yet individuals do not always succumb to motivational incentives due to their capacity for *self-regulation*. Self-regulation has been used in previous SM research to explain motivations and intentions to use SM (c.f., [19]). Various reviews also contend that difficulties with emotion regulation—a

form of self-regulation—are risk factors for addiction like smartphone, internet, and SM addiction [11, 51, 52].

Emotion-regulation is an individual's ability to recognize, accept, and shift their emotions to respond adaptively, in a more balanced and appropriate way, to their situation and fluctuating demands posed by one's environment [53]. Where emotion-regulation focuses specifically on emotions, it can allow individuals to manage behaviors incentivized by their implicit motives. Emotion-regulation strategies include *cognitive reappraisal* (reframing one's perception of a situation to modify its emotional impact), *suppression*, (deliberately inhibiting emotional expressions); and employing *diversion techniques* to shift one's focus from a distressing emotional event or stimulus [5].

Recent research suggests that the higher the emotion-regulation, the less likely SM use will develop into 'addiction'. For instance, a scoping literature review found that individuals who struggle with emotion-regulation are at a higher risk for developing problematic internet use and SM use [11]. Relatedly, a systematic review of two decades of social networking site (SNS) research found that emotion regulation skills are "important tools targets in preventing problematic SNS use" [52, p. 534]. A further study found that SM users with maladaptive use patterns reported significantly more issues related to emotion-regulation, including increased experiential avoidance, difficulty accepting emotional responses, limited access to emotion-regulation strategies, poor impulse control, and challenges engaging in goal-directed behaviors [51].

As such, based on such prior research, we introduce emotion-regulation as a moderator of the relationship between SM use and SM addiction. We propose that an individual with strong emotion-regulation abilities will be less prone to SM use driven exclusively by implicit motives. Moreover, where an individual's use of SM is driven by implicit motives, we propose that their ability to regulate their emotions will attenuate their risk of addiction by enabling the modulation of their emotions thereby allowing them to direct their behavior away from SM. Simply put, individuals who can effectively engage in emotional-regulation strategies are able to take purposeful and intentional measures to influence and control their emotional reactions to environmental cues like the perceived functionalities of an SM which incentivize use through their interaction with a user's implicit motives. Thus, users with better emotion-regulation abilities are more likely to have well-adjusted usage patterns and a lower risk of developing SM addiction. As such, we propose:

P3a: *Emotion-regulation reduces implicitly driven SM use.; P3b:* *Emotion-regulation moderates the SM use and SM addiction relationship by reducing the likelihood of developing an SM addiction.*

4. Discussion

In this theoretical literature review, we proposed that SM use is motivated by the fit between an individual's implicit motives and the functionalities of an SM platform is perceived to offer. In doing so, we stipulate that as the fit between one's needs and the PSMF of a platform increases, the motivation to use the platform increases – a pattern that may put users at risk for SM addiction if they are unable to regulate their emotions.

Our research offers various contributions. *First*, through our review, we defined a new construct, namely the PSMF construct. *Second*, by theorizing the interaction, or fit, between PSMF and a user's implicit motives, we advance understanding of the roles played by SM functionalities (and related features) on SM use and addiction. Research to date has yet to fully uncover the antecedents of SM addiction and the underlying mechanisms [1, 54]. Moreover, despite evidence that functions and features contribute to SM addiction, less attention has been devoted to understanding how the reinforcing characteristics of IT lead to addictive use [1, 3]. Thus, our work helps to bridge this important gap.

Third, we contribute to the SM literature by adopting a less common theoretical perspective rooted in implicit and nonconscious motives. While research distinguishing the *conscious* and *nonconscious* aspects of users' characteristics driving SM use has become more prevalent (c.f., [50, 55]), our understanding of how nonconscious motives orient SM behavior is less developed. This gap is a missed opportunity, given the theoretical alignment between MDT's implicit motives and perspectives of IS addiction which typically characterize the phenomenon as behavior driven by a lack of control and consciousness [12].

By theorizing how the fit between users' implicit motives and a platform's PSMF creates various motivational pathways leading to use and addiction, our work lays a broad foundation for future empirical research on SM addiction. Such research is essential, as the prominence of each perceived SM functionality is likely to vary across platforms [7] and where differences in the strength of a user's implicit motives determine which situations hold incentive value for them [21]. For example, such testing might reveal that the perceived functionalities and features of LinkedIn, a professional platform, may provide stronger incentives (for use) for individuals high in the achievement motive, while Facebook may offer stronger incentives for those high in the affiliation motive.

Finally, by integrating emotion-regulation into our theorizing, we answer calls for research exploring mitigation strategies for reducing IT addictions [1]. In

doing so, our model can be used as a foundation to explore how different emotion-regulation strategies might impact a user's risk and liability to SM addiction.

5. Research limitations and next steps

Our study has certain limitations—some of which present future research opportunities. First, we did not incorporate explicit motives in our theorizing. While this allowed us to focus on untangling the complex interactions between one's implicit motives and our multi-dimensional PSMF construct, to better understand the complex phenomenon of SM addiction, future research should aim to develop a more contextualized and nuanced model that includes explicit motives, as well as various factors including individual factors (including offline activities), environmental factors, and platform factors. A process-based approach could also be valuable in exploring and unpacking feedback loops between use, experiences, and the fit between implicit motives and the PSMF. Second, this paper takes a general view of emotion-regulation; exploring specific strategies presents an interesting area for future inquiry.

As a next step, we will test our theory using the Picture Story Exercise (PSE) method, a qualitative approach where participants write imaginative stories based on previously validated images created to assess specific implicit motives. After participants complete the exercise, content analysis will be used to evaluate the representation of the three implicit motives in each story, using Winter's Running Text Coding System². Each participant will receive a score for each implicit motive variable. The fit between the implicit motive variable and the PSMF variable will be modelled using moderation analysis. We will test the model using Partial Least Squares (PLS) structural equation modeling (SEM) as it excels in predictive analysis, evaluating propositions, and exploring critical links between core concepts in complex models [56]. Such testing will help to provide further granularity in the functions and features that drive SM use and addiction.

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² Winter's (1994) "Manual for Scoring Motive Imagery in Running Text (v.4.2)". Available [here](#).

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