

The Relationships Among Aggression, Life Satisfaction & Social Media Reactivity

Thomas Fletcher, John Revels, & Merry Sleight, Ph.D.
Winthrop University

Introduction

Social media is integrated into most adults' daily lives with millions of posts viewed each day. Higher levels of social media use have been linked to higher levels of relational aggression (Holmgren & Coyne, 2017) and lower levels of life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2016). Most of the research has focused on media content as the predictors for these outcomes. For example, Pauwels and Hardyns (2018) found that posts promoting extremist views elicit extremist behavior, while Rost et al. (2016) found that posts that violate social justice norms elicit aggressive reactions from users. Less research has examined individual users' willingness to respond specifically through social media to different types of posts. In other words, what posts make users want to post a reply? The current pattern of data suggests that emotional posts do not necessarily provoke the most reactions. For example, Choi (2015) found that young adults avoid posting in response to narcissistic posts, although such posts are likely to elicit an emotional response. Similarly, Velez and Sleight (2020) reported that young adults were more reluctant to respond to social posts that had an emotional tone, even though negative posts elicited strong emotional reactions.

Our study further examined these issues by examining characteristics of adults, rather than characteristics of the post, that predicted willingness to respond to social media posts varying in emotional content. We hypothesized that a higher aggression score would predict increased reactivity to social media posts. We also hypothesized that life satisfaction would be negatively correlated with reactivity to social media posts.

Method

Participants:

Participants were 110 adults with a mean age of 38.38 ($SD = 19.61$). The majority of participants were Caucasian (87%) and women (58%).

Scales:

Participants encountered social media posts which varied in emotional content and subject matter. After each post, participants reported their emotional reaction, agreement level, and likelihood of responding. Participants also responded to scales to assess aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992) and life satisfaction (Conway et al., 2000).

Predictors of Reactivity

The more people wanted to react to the posts, the:

- higher their life satisfaction [$r(110) = .22, p = .02$].
- lower their anger [$r(110) = -.24, p = .01$].
- lower their hostility [$r(110) = -.22, p = .02$].
- older they were [$r(109) = .24, p = .01$].
- more likely they were to say they would react to the posts. [$r(110) = .78, p < .001$].

The more likely people were to respond to the post, the:

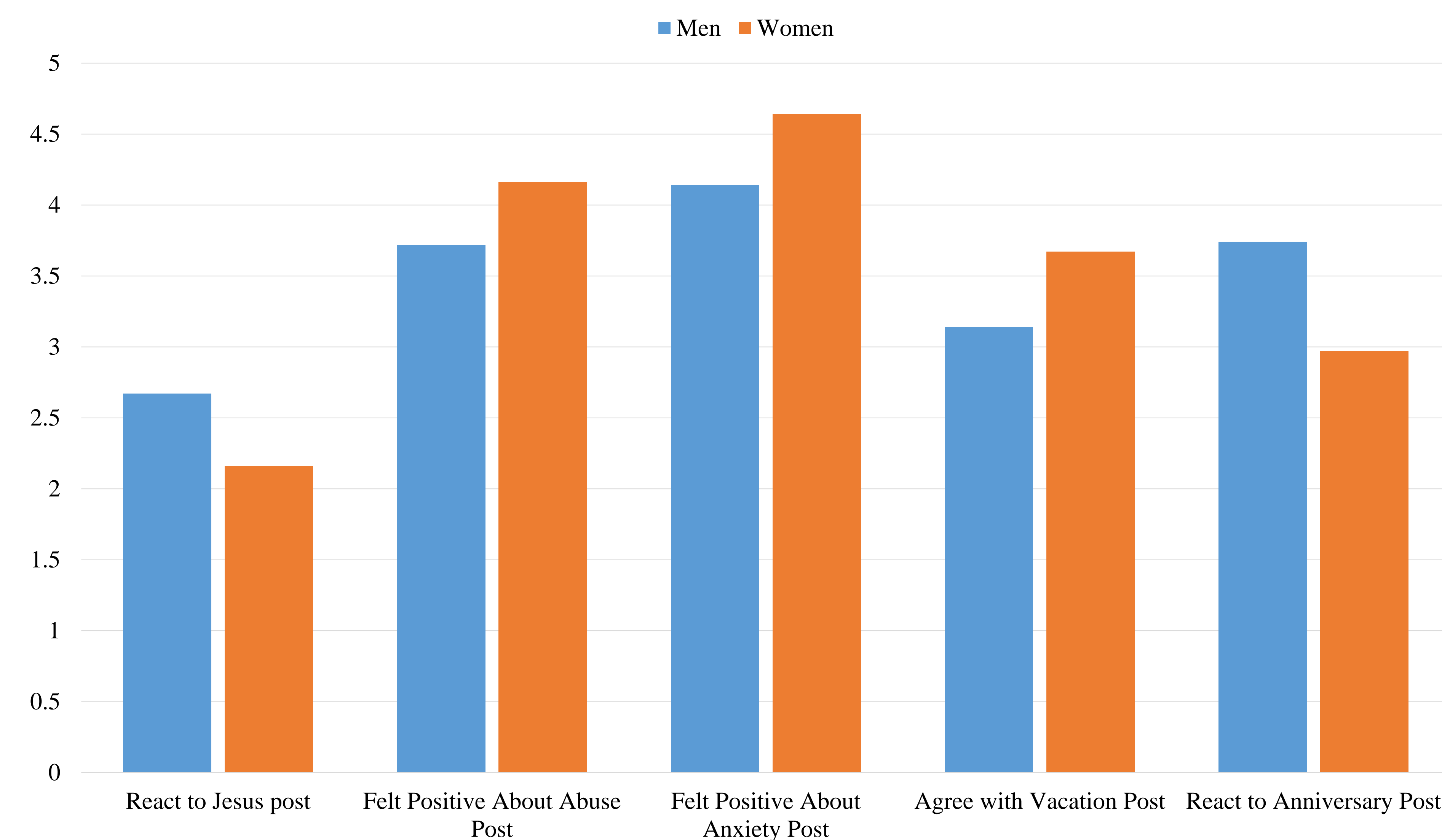
- higher their life satisfaction [$r(110) = .26, p = .006$].
- lower their anger [$r(110) = -.20, p = .03$].
- lower their hostility [$r(110) = -.20, p = .03$].
- lower their verbal aggression [$r(110) = -.21, p = .03$].
- older they were [$r(109) = .29, p = .002$].

The more participants wanted to react to or reacted to, the political posts had no significant correlation with their political ideology or how important social media was in their lives.

Reactivity to Social Media Posts

Want to React		Actually Would React	
I need a vacation	2.38 (1.040)	Animal Abuse	4.25 (1.167)
Jesus was an immigrant	2.35 (1.142)	Jesus was an immigrant	4.19 (1.243)
Animal abuse	2.27 (1.1)	Climate Change	4.15 (1.205)
Climate change	2.09 (1.164)	I need a vacation	4.11 (1.272)
All lives matter	2.01 (1.303)	MAGA hats	3.88 (1.386)
Mask	1.82 (1.441)	All lives matter	3.83 (1.4)
Justice for Breonna	1.80 (1.312)	Justice for Breonna	3.76 (1.368)
MAGA hats	1.77 (1.379)	Masks	3.69 (1.495)
Anniversary	1.52 (1.507)	Vaccines	3.53 (1.457)
Anxiety	1.46 (1.463)	Anxiety	3.47 (1.519)
Vaccines	1.22 (1.541)	Anniversary	3.32 (1.619)

Gender Comparisons



We compared men and women using an independent t -test. Compared to women, men wanted to react more to the post about Jesus being an immigrant [$t(104) = 2.41, p = .02$], felt less positively about the animal rights post [$t(105) = -2.58, p = .01$], felt less positively about the anxiety post [$t(105) = -3.50, p = .001$], agreed more with the anxiety post [$t(105) = 3.33, p = .001$], agreed less with the post about needing a vacation [$t(105) = -2.70, p = .008$], felt more positively about the anniversary post [$t(105) = 3.17, p = .002$], agreed less with the anniversary post [$t(105) = -2.23, p = .03$], wanted to react less to the anniversary post [$t(105) = 3.37, p = .001$], and were more likely to react to the anniversary post [$t(105) = 2.48, p = .02$].

Social Media Posts

- Black Lives Matter because All Lives Matter
- Jesus was an immigrant.
- Billions of animals are tortured, raped, abused and murdered every year so you can eat them and their bodily secretions
- Don't pretend like you have an anxiety disorder – you're just lazy and insecure
- You can identify the racists by their "Make America Great Again" hats.
- I need a vacation, and then I need a vacation from my vacation
- Stupid parents vaccinate kids. Hope you love Autism as much as you love vaccines
- You should probably read up on the science behind climate change before posting incorrect opinions and looking like an idiot
- People care more about bad cops than they care about their victims #justiceforbreonna
- I wear a mask because I believe in science
- Happy 28th anniversary to my parents #rolemodels #truelovedoesexist

Closing Thoughts

In sum, we found support for the idea that participant characteristics predicted adults' willingness to respond to social media posts; however, the data contradicted our hypotheses. In fact, we found the opposite of what we expected to find. People who were happier and less aggressive were more likely to respond to social media posts, while younger, less satisfied, and more aggressive participants seemed to want to avoid responding to social media posts.

These findings may reflect the fact that social media is often used as a tool to enhance social relationships. Thus, people who are happy and less confrontational may be more motivated to post to social media as a strategy to connect with others; they are likely to have had more positive responses to their posts in the past.

These findings add to our understanding of social media use, suggesting that responsiveness to social media posts is determined by both characteristics of the user and of the posted material.