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Facebook and Co. – How social networks can help us receive useful information and emotional support

Logging in Facebook or other social networks is nowadays part of our daily routine. While constant checking of status messages is often associated with stress, envy and reduced wellbeing, researchers of the Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) found out: Stress is influenced by external factors and not by Facebook usage. Concerns that Facebook has a negative impact on the wellbeing are therefore exaggerated. The platform even offers possibilities of social support. The professional use of social media pays off as well: Anyone who uses LinkedIn has professional information advantages.

Tübingen, 06 March 2018. Social media help us stay connected with many people – no matter if they are close friends (so-called strong ties), acquaintances (weak ties) or people we barely know. Research on social networks has shown that strong ties provide us with emotional support whereas weak ties provide us with new information. To examine whether this pattern also occurs on social media, Prof. Dr. Sonja Utz of the IWM and her team studied how social media affect *how* we receive information and emotional support and *by whom*. Their project ReDefTie – “Redefining tie strength – how social media (can) help us get non-redundant useful information and emotional support” – was funded by the European Research Council, one of the most important sponsors at EU level.

Facebook provides social support, LinkedIn informational benefits

A longitudinal study with Dutch online users over the period from 2013 till 2017 examined the effects of the use of different social networks. By including privately used networks like Facebook and platforms for professional exchange like LinkedIn, a differentiated and comprehensive understanding was gained.

Facebook use does not result in more stress or lower life satisfaction in the long term

Facebook is predominantly used for maintaining friendships. Sceptics argue that social networks only give the illusion of friendships. But the findings show that those networks and the so-called virtual friends offer concrete benefits. These social relationships are therefore more than an illusion: Facebook users (more than 73% of the participants) reported more online social support than nonusers. And the more they asked for support, the more they got. The effect even intensified over a longer period: Persons, who received help once, still asked their online network more often for advice six month later. Moreover, Facebook use does not result in more stress or lower life satisfaction in the long term. Concerns that Facebook will have a negative impact on the wellbeing seem therefore exaggerated.

Further findings of the study: Receiving more support is not associated with higher life satisfaction – stress and life satisfaction are more influenced by offline events than through the use of social media.

Stronger effects occurred when examining the use of business networks like LinkedIn. The users reported higher professional informational benefits than non-users. Thereby, active use and strategic network building play a crucial role. The experiments also conducted within the project indicate that the regular skimming of updates contributes to the development of so-called *ambient awareness*, knowledge about the network members and their expertise. These results have implications for the use of social media in organizational knowledge management. Spending time

on professional platforms should not be seen as wasteful but could be encouraged. It helps to find the right contacts and to keep an eye on current developments. The findings of the longitudinal study of Sonja Utz offer valuable insights to a differentiated debate about the effects of social media.

After completion of the project, the data have been made available for other scientists in order to ensure optimal subsequent use. Sharing the data is another step towards Open Science after publishing the findings of the project as Open Access Publications.

Publications und Open Data REDEFTIE: www.redeftie.eu // **Well-Being Study:** <http://econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/full/10.1027/1864-1105/a000222>

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Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien

The Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) analyses how digital technologies can be used to improve knowledge processes. The psychological basic research of the 110 scientists is concerned with practical fields like school and university, knowledge work with digital media, knowledge-based internet use and knowledge transfer in museums. From 2009 till 2016, the IWM together with the University of Tuebingen organised the first Leibniz-ScienceCampus on “Informational Environments”, which is continued as follow-up project under the heading “Cognitive Interfaces”.

The Leibniz Association

The Leibniz Association connects 93 independent research institutions that range in focus from the natural, engineering and environmental sciences via economics, spatial and social sciences to the humanities. Leibniz institutes address issues of social, economic and ecological relevance. They conduct knowledge-driven and applied basic research, maintain scientific infrastructure and provide research-based services. The Leibniz Association identifies focus areas for knowledge transfer to policy-makers, academia, business and the public. Leibniz institutions collaborate intensively with universities – in the form of “Leibniz ScienceCampi” (thematic partnerships between university and non-university research institutes), for example – as well as with industry and other partners at home and abroad. They are subject to an independent evaluation procedure that is unparalleled in its transparency. Due to the importance of the institutions for the country as a whole, they are funded jointly by the federation and the federal states.