

Escapism and Belonging: How Fun-Based Influencer Interactions Boost Happiness on Social Media

Sana Anwar¹, Fajar Tanveer¹ & Ahsan Zubair²

¹MS Scholar, Lyallpur Business School, Government College University Faisalabad

²Assistant Professor, Lyallpur Business School, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: February 25, 2025
Revised: April 05, 2025
Accepted: April 07, 2025
Available Online: April 10, 2025

Keywords:

Need to belong, Escape, Fun, Happiness, Social Media Influencers, SPSS, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Corresponding Author:

Ahsan Zubair

Email:

ahsanzubair@gcuf.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Influencers on social media play a crucial role in shaping users' participation and effective experiences online. This study investigates the impact of engaging with influencers for fun on happiness, with a focus on the indirect effect of escape and the direct effect of the need to belong. The study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) on a sample of 300 social media users to investigate the links between fun, escape, the need to belong, and happiness. The findings show that the need to belong strongly influences both escape and happiness, while fun has a favorable influence on escape, which in turn increases happiness. The results underscore the importance of escaping as a vital psychological pathway to strengthen the relationship of fun-based influencer connection to happiness. By examining how digital connections meet emotional demands, this study contributes to the expanding body of research on social media psychology. Practical results indicate that contributing to belonging, inclusive and actual participation indicates that influential people and platforms of social networks can increase their satisfaction with users. Future research can examine how different kinds of content impact the user's experience and the long-term effects of happiness.



Introduction

In the modern age of technology, social media is more than just a communication tool; it influences how people communicate, engage the individuals, and meet their needs for thought. Social media has now become an essential part of people's lives and has changed the way through which people entertain themselves, make friends, and happy. Among the most common features of social media, the rise of social media influencers has greatly impacted the usage behavior of users

(Mishra & Ashfaq, 2023). These influencers, who are creating very interesting and relatable content, have created a digital community where people can find fun and enjoy themselves. As more people use influencers for entertainment, it is important to find out if it actually increases their happiness. People follow humorous influencers for fun and escaping, but it's not obvious if this activity creates a feeling of belonging and eventually increases happiness. This study investigates whether social media use for fun and overall happiness is mediated by a sense of belonging.

Interacting with social media influencers for fun has become a new way of leisure, where users watch funny or interesting content to relieve stress. However, besides the entertainment, this interaction often satisfies the more profound psychological needs, for instance, the need to belonging which is the desire to belong and be accepted in a group. Social media influencers have the ability to gather people and make them feel accepted through the online communities that they create. This sense of connection may help explain how the interaction with influencers for fun leads to happiness of the individuals involved.

Despite the fact that a number of studies have been conducted on the effects of social media on different aspects of life like education(Al-Sammak et al., 2024), mental health, and food choices(Ahmad et al., 2023; Merino et al., 2024) but very few have focused on how fun-based interactions with influencers affect happiness and whether the need to belong is important in this relationship rather than in recent study need to belong is used as a moderator(Aw & Labrecque, 2020; Jain et al., 2024) .The present study therefore seeks to contribute to the understanding of this relationship by exploring whether those who follow influencers for fun are happier and whether the need to belong is a key process in this relationship.

Understanding this relationship is critical for both theoretical as well as practical considerations. Users get knowledge into how social media actions affect their emotional well-being. It offers techniques for influencers and sponsors to create content that promotes not just fun but also significant relationships. Academically, it contributes to the expanding body of work on the psychological consequences of social media use by providing a complex point of view on how fun, belonging, and happiness are intertwined in today's technological world.

Literature Review

People are continuously looking for methods to improve their happiness in current rapid online world, frequently with fun interests including social interactions. Behavior among humans is fundamentally driven by the need to belong in and have fun, which shapes how individuals interact with their surroundings. But as a way to cope, people can resort to escape—such as internet use, fun, or others distractions—if their requirements are not sufficiently satisfied. Assessing the influence of such elements on general wellbeing requires a comprehension of their interactions. A useful model for examining this connection is offered by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights how physiological demands influence ambition and overall happiness. According to (Vallerand, 2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), people have three fundamental psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. When it comes to social media influencers, followers' desire for both social and emotional relations with influencers is in line with the SDT demand for relatedness(Ryan & Deci, 2000). The happiness and pleasure that come from following influencers can satisfy followers' demand for competence because they interact with content that makes them feel accomplished or educated(Vallerand, 2021). Additionally, escape in this context can be viewed as a type of autonomy, with people using social media to separate from everyday demands or reduce anxiety (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). According to (Ryan & Deci, 2024), influencers may help their followers feel happy and well-off by fulfilling these fundamental

psychological needs. This creates a mediate pathway where escape strengthens the connection between happiness, fun and need to belong.

Need to belong with Escape

One of the basic human motivations that leads people to look for acceptability and personal relationships inside a group is the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Influencers are essential in meeting this desire on social media because they provide a feeling of belonging and community (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). These influencers establish surroundings in which their followers experience a feeling of connection and inclusion. Happiness emotionally is closely related to the need to belong, and social media can help people feel more confident and like themselves (Brahmer et al., 2018). People are social beings; therefore, they are drawn to platforms that facilitate interaction and connection. Social media is a great way to meet this basic need, especially when interacting with influencers (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).

Fun with Escape

Fun, which is frequently connected to pleasant thoughts and feelings, is essential when using social media (Shin & Park, 2019). Fun for social media influencer followers comes from the enjoyment, laughter, and escape that influencers offer through their posts (Bayer et al., 2020). Fun experiences boost engagement among users on social media platforms and generate favorable emotional reactions. Additionally, it creates a feeling of delight and enthusiasm, which encourages followers to come back and engage in social media conversations. People are more inclined to develop closer relationships with influencers when the content is entertaining and engaging (Shin, 2020). Consequently, having fun improves the user experience overall and is crucial to their contentment and pleasure. One of the main reasons people use social media is escape, which is defined as psychologically removing oneself from daily stressors (Kircaburun et al., 2018). In order to escape reality and get consolation from their troubles or boring routines, followers may utilize influencers' content (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). This type of escape can serve as a coping strategy that is both beneficial and detrimental. It enables consumers to relax and momentarily forget their worries, on the one hand. However, overuse as a means of escape can develop undesirable behaviors like social media addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Influencers create content that immerses their followers in romanticized worlds that are full of adventure, beauty, and joy in order to enable this escape, which can have a reducing effect on feelings and actions (Dhir et al., 2018).

Happiness with Escape

Happiness is a key aspect of using social media, especially when users feel good after interacting with others and consuming content (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Influencers on social media frequently provide followers with motivation, amusement, and delight, all of which raise happiness levels (Shin & Park, 2019). Fun and escape-related positive emotions have a big impact on a follower's wellbeing. Social media sites serve as venues for users to obtain emotional fulfillment, encouragement, and social benefits. Research has indicated that people's happiness increases with their sense of connection to others, especially when their need to belong is fulfilled. But it's crucial to understand that enjoyment on social media is individualized and dependent on distinctions (Kircaburun et al., 2018).

H1: The Need to Belong Positively Influences with Escape

People who interact with social media influencers more frequently will be more prone to escape behavior. This is due to the fact that social media platforms satisfy the psychological desire for belonging by fostering a sense of community and social connection. Users may look for these

interactions as a coping mechanism for feelings of social isolation or loneliness since they feel linked to influencers and their following (Kim & Lee, 2011).

H2: Fun positively influence with Escape

When someone engages in escape behavior on social media, they will have more fun overall. This is because social media is an immersive environment where people can enjoy influencer material and detach from the stresses of real life. By temporarily escaping reality, fantasy enables users to have more fun while interacting with influencer-driven information (Hie, Zhong, Berger, & Bryson, 2021).

H3: Escape is positively influence with happiness

The happiness of social media users who use escape behavior is probably higher. People find satisfaction in participating in social media groups or following influencers who share their interests as they detach themselves from the stresses of everyday life. Social media becomes a source of positive emotion for users because of this escape, which relieves emotional tension and increases happiness (Liebers & Schramm, 2023).

H4: The Need to Belong Positively Influences with Happiness

Engaging with social media influencers will be more enjoyable for people who have a strong need to belong in. The entire happiness of social media is increased by the feeling of being connected to influencers and compatible followers, which creates a more engaged and pleasant interaction. People are more inclined to interact with content that increases their sense of happiness when they feel like they are part of a particular group. It has been demonstrated that interacting with social media influencers produces favorable emotional effects. An environment where followers can feel happy, amused, and connected is created by influencers who post inspirational or entertaining content. Additionally, this material frequently promotes "flow," a state of intense concentration on a task that leads to greater satisfaction (Huett et al., 2021).

H5: Escape Mediates the Relationship Between Need to Belong and Fun/Happiness

Escape plays a mediating role in the interaction between the need to belong in, have fun, and be happiness in the context of social media influencers. Escape serves as a mediator in this situation by intensifying the positive emotional sensations that come from using social media. In the context of social media influencers, the mediating role of escape on the link between the need to belong for fun, happiness, offers important insight into the emotional dynamics of online interaction. A major mechanism in this process is escape, which enables users to disengage from reality and lose themselves in enjoyable and emotionally fulfilling content. The relationship between the need to belong in and the fun and happiness that come from social media interactions will be mediated by escape behavior. People who look to social media influencers for a feeling of community are more likely to act statistically, which raises their degree of enjoyment and contentment (Huett et al., 2021).

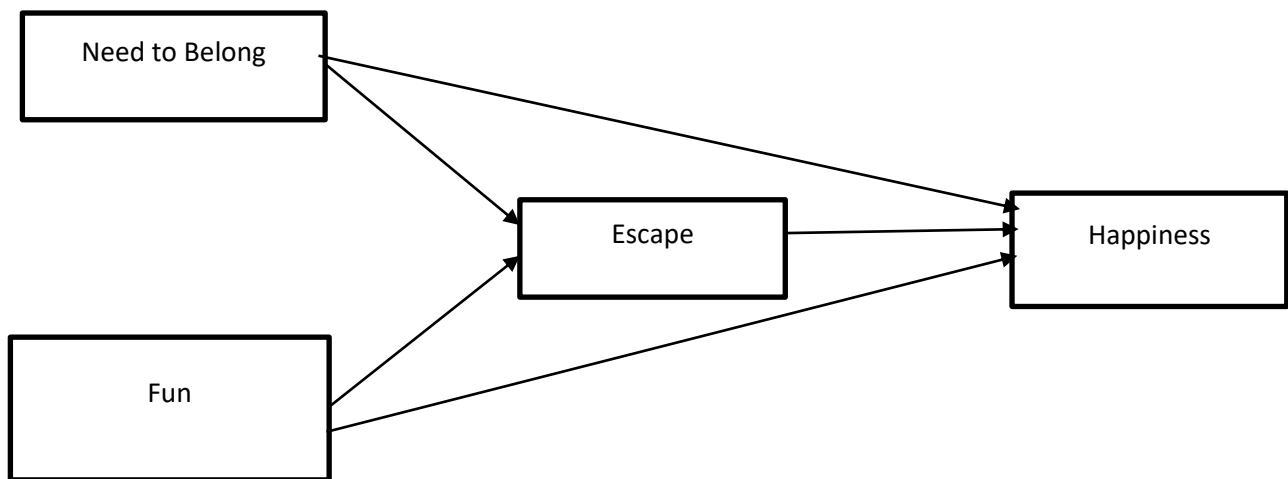


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Materials and Methods

This study used a survey-based technique to test its hypothesis and examine the presented theoretical model. A structured questionnaire was constructed. The measures of current study consist of two sections one is demographics and the other section having other variable analysis including fun, escape, need to belong and happiness in which, fun and escape, scales have been adapted from (Malik et al., 2023), need to belong scale (Leary et al., 2013) and the short, scale of happiness is taken from (Hills & Argyle, 2001). The sample size consists of 300 social media users who follow social media for fun and happiness whether need to belonging is the key process in this relationship. The collected data is analyzed by using SPSS for demographics and PLS-SEM for testing the hypothesis. The demographics table consisted of demographic variables including gender, age, education, employment status, content type, social media site used and social media usage hours. The fun and escape scale (Malik et al., 2023) consist of 3 items, the response rate of fun and escape based on 7 Likert-scale (1=SD and 7=SA). The fun and escape indicates the high level of Cronbach's alpha reliability ($\alpha=0.847$, $\alpha=0.880$). Short scale of happiness (Hills & Argyle, 2001) consists of 8 items (e.g., I feel that life is very rewarding) and this scale response rate is also based on 7 Likert-scale (1=SD and 2=SA) and this also shows the high level of Cronbach's alpha reliability ($\alpha=0.923$) and the last scale is need to belong was measured with 4 items (e.g., I do not like being alone) and their response rate is also based on 7 Likert-scale (1=SD and 2=SA), shows the high level of Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.878$).

Results and Analysis

Among the 300 respondents, 56.3% of the collected responses were female whereas 43.7% were male, its shown in table 1. Most of the respondents under age (25-34;49.7% and 18-24;39.0%), the users who watch social media were from high school or below were 52.7% after that 33.3% were from bachelor's degree. The majority of respondents work full-time (37.7%) or part-time (32.0%), with fewer students (18.3%), jobless (9.3%), and self-employed (2.7%). The content that is most frequently viewed is humor/entertainment (37.0%), with YouTube dominating the platform (52.3%). Social media use is highest at 3-4 hours per day (35.3%), with less spending 5+ hours (13.7%). The demographic data of respondents were analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Table 1 (Demographics)

Demographics		Frequency	Percentage %
Age	Under 18	9	3.0
	18-24	117	39.0
	25-34	149	49.7
	35-44	25	8.3
Gender	Male	131	43.7
	Female	169	56.3
Education	High school or below	158	52.7
	Bachelor degree	100	33.3
	Master degree	35	11.7
	Doctoral degree	7	2.3
Employment status	Employed full-time	55	18.3
	Employed part-time	28	9.3
	Self-employed	113	37.7
	Student	96	32.0
	Unemployed	8	2.7
Content Type	Humor/entertainment	111	37.0
	Travel/Adventure	30	10.0
	Lifestyles/Vlogs	86	28.7
	Beauty/Fashion	73	24.3
Social Media Platform	Facebook	56	18.7
	WhatsApp	28	9.3
	YouTube	157	52.3
	Instagram	59	19.7
Social media usage	Less than 1 hour per hour	81	27.0
	1-2 hours per day	72	24.0
	3-4 hours per day	106	35.3
	5 or more hours per day	41	13.7

The dataset was analyzed using partial least squares structural equations modeling (PLS-SEM) and SmartPLS-4 (Ringle et al., 2022). Table 2 illustrates the measuring model's results. According to the statistics, outer loadings for practically all indicators exceeded the intended score, 0.707 (Hair et al., 2017). The loading value of one indicator, HPP8, was 0.695. However, the construct as a whole met reliability standard, thus item HPP8 was acquired.

Table 2 (Reliability and Validity)

Construct	Measures	Outer-Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Average Variance Extracted
Escape	ES1	0.879	0.847	0.848	0.766
	ES2	0.873			
	ES3	0.874			
Fun	F1	0.907	0.880	0.880	0.807
	F2	0.920			
	F3	0.866			
Need to Belong	NTB1	0.856	0.878	0.879	0.732
	NTB2	0.856			

	NTB3	0.844			
	NTB4	0.866			
Happiness	HPP1	0.839	0.923	0.935	0.650
	HPP2	0.859			
	HPP3	0.872			
	HPP4	0.858			
	HPP5	0.811			
	HPP6	0.770			
	HPP7	0.727			
	HPP8	0.695			

For all variables, the composite reliability (CR) values above the 0.70 criterion (Joseph F. Hair et al., 2017). Furthermore, Cronbach's Alpha value was greater than 0.60 (Churchill, 1979). Convergent validity was determined by examining average variance extracted (AVE) criteria larger than 0.50 (Hair et al., 2017) for all of the variables. The (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) criteria, as well as the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler et al., 2015), were used to determine discriminant validity, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3(Discriminant Validity)

	ES	F	HPP	NTB	R-square
ES	0.875				0.745
F	0.810	0.898			-
HPP	0.735	0.741	0.806		0.652
NTB	0.837	0.826	0.786	0.855	-

The numbers in bold italic type represent each construct's squared AVE values. All constructs have squared AVE values that exceed correlation values with other constructs. Thus, the result by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) criteria showed satisfied. Table 3 highlights values with HTMT ratios of less than 0.90, indicating constructions that meet the HTMT criteria.

The Smart-PLS bootstrapping method was used to analyze the hypotheses with 5000 sub-samples (Hair et al., 2012). The Smart-PLS bootstrapping method was used to analyze the hypotheses with 5000 sub-samples The findings reveal substantial correlations between the factors investigated in the study. The study found that escape (ES) has a positive and substantial effect on happiness (HPP) ($\beta = 0.168$, $p = 0.023$), whereas fun (F) significantly impacts both escape ($\beta = 0.373$, $p = 0.000$) and happiness ($\beta = 0.289$, $p = 0.003$). NTB (need to belong) substantially predicts escape ($\beta = 0.529$, $p = 0.000$) and happiness ($\beta = 0.548$, $p = 0.000$). The distinct indirect effects highlight the mediation function of escape in which fun is indirectly effect on happiness through escape ($\beta = 0.063$, $p = 0.038$), indicating that individuals who are experiencing fun might be engage in escapist activities that enhance their happiness. Research suggests that those with a strong need for interactions with others may engage in escape, which can lead to increased happiness ($\beta = 0.089$, $p = 0.035$). These findings highlight the significance of escape as an indicator of consumer well-being.

Table 4 (Hypothesis Analysis)

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Total Effects				
H1: ES -> HPP	0.168	0.074	2.272	0.023
H2: F -> ES	0.373	0.073	5.079	0.000
H3: F -> HPP	0.289	0.071	4.073	0.003
H4: NTB -> ES	0.529	0.069	7.704	0.000
H5: NTB -> HPP	0.548	0.074	7.425	0.000
Specific Indirect Effects				
F -> ES -> HPP	0.063	0.030	2.080	0.038
NTB -> ES -> HPP	0.089	0.042	2.110	0.035

Note: ES(Escape), HPP(Happiness), F(Fun), NTB (Need to Belong)

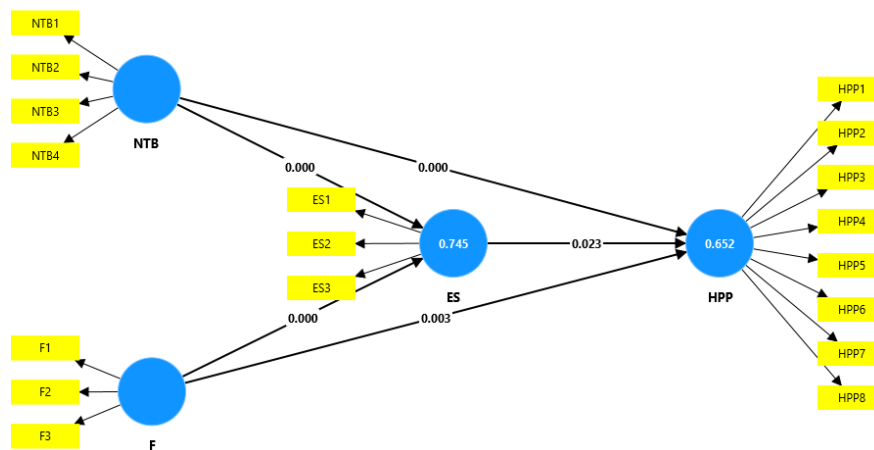


Figure 2: Structural Equation Model Smart PLS

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how delightful and the need to belong influence happiness, with escape acting as an intermediary between them. The findings exfoliate light on how social media engagement can enhance mental wellbeing through performance. The results show that passing fun on social media encourages people to engage in escapist actions, eventually leading to lesser happiness. also, the need to belong strongly influences both escape and happiness, suggesting that individuals who seek social connection may turn to performance as a way to fulfill emotional requirements, which in turn enhances their wellbeing. The results of this study show how important escape is as a mediator in the relationship between the need to belong and the results of fun and happiness when using social media, especially through influencers. The hypothesis that the need to belong increases the probability of interacting with influencers' content, which ultimately leads to fun and happiness, was validated.

This study also highlights psychological knowledge in social media consumption trends. Young people (age 18) some of them in high school formations have become the most active social media users. On average, most respondents spent three hours on social media a day, with YouTube dominating as the preferred platform. These patterns highlight a deeply ingrained dependence on digital entertainment as a source of participation and emotional relief. From a theoretical

perspective, this study broadens an understanding of happiness by showing an indirect path that it successfully promotes to understand the effects of social media. Although previous studies primarily focused on direct effects, this study adds depth by highlighting a critical psychological mechanism (Alkaraki et al., 2024). In this way, it contributes to the ongoing debate about digital happiness and psychological resistance in an online environment.

Furthermore, the mediating effect of escape was validated, as people used social media to escape from their daily pressures, which increased their happiness and fulfillment even more. Influencers indirectly improve their followers' mental health by meeting the need to belong in, which feeds a vicious circle of interaction and satisfaction (Younis, 2024). According to the study, it's critical to comprehend how social media influencers and platforms can meet basic psychological needs, increasing user fulfillment and producing happy feelings. Previous research happiness wasn't effectively addressed didn't work but in previous research need to belong used as a moderator with smartphone addicted adolescents (Wang et al., 2017).

Limitation and Future Recommendation

Although this study gives valuable information, there are multiple aspects for future research to investigate. This study has one limitation: it is based on self-reported data, which may result in bias. Future research should consider using mixed-method approaches, such as qualitative interviews and observational studies, to acquire a better understanding of user experience. Furthermore, this study used a cross-sectional design, which limited its capacity to prove correlation. Future research should use longitudinal methods to examine how social media participation, fun, and escapism change over time and their long-term impact on happiness. Experiments could also help determine the connections that exist between these variables. Since the need to belong is crucial for boosting participation and improving mental health, social media influencers should be aware of the psychological demands of their followers. Influencers have the ability to provide material that makes followers feel included and appreciated by creating a feeling of purpose (Bayer et al., 2020). By creating features that encourage a feeling of community and constructive emotional interaction, social media platforms can improve user experience. By providing content moderation features that foster healthy interactions and real-world connections, platforms could counteract the potential adverse effects of escapism and keep users from becoming too dependent on virtual escape. In order to investigate the long-term effects of social media use on psychological well-being, future research could concentrate on longitudinal studies. It would be helpful to know how prolonged use of social media affects mental health over time, even while this study emphasizes the immediate advantages of escapism in satisfying the need to belong. Examining if using social media for escapism increases happiness or if it can have detrimental psychological effects like reliance or a reduction in in-person social contacts could provide more insight into the long-term impacts of these processes. Future studies should also look at how various demographic and cultural groups see the connection between escape, fun, happiness, and the need to belong. Different patterns in how people engage with influencers may result from regional differences in social media use, cultural norms, and beliefs.

Additionally, the extent to which escape mediates the relationship between happiness and belonging may vary depending on demographic factors like age and gender. Yet another suggestion is to conduct a more extensive investigation into demographic changes. This study found that younger people (age 18) were highly active on social media, but future research could look into differences across a wider age range. Understanding how this dynamic change occurs at various stages of life can offer significant perspective into wellbeing approaches. As social media platforms continue to develop, future research should look at how emerging technologies, such as the impact of virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), will affect them. These new

digital experiences continue to influence how individuals deal with social media, seeking emotional relief. Practical results indicate that contributing to belonging, inclusive and actual participation indicates that influential people and platforms of social networks can increase their satisfaction with users. Future research can examine how different kinds of content impact the user's experience and the long-term effects of happiness.

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