Analysis Of the Influence of Social Networks on Consumption Decisions and Behaviors

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Abstract. The social network of an individual and the peer group that an individual is in has a crucial impact on the individual's consumption decisions and behaviors. From their social networks and peer groups, individuals can develop positive consumption decisions and behaviors, such as enabling information sharing and knowledge exchange related to consumption, exposing themselves to various beliefs and diverse perspectives, involving themselves in social networks that share the same interests, providing support to individuals who are struggling due to emotional and physical challenges, and also promoting collaborative consumption in which individual and collectively share resources. On the other hand, negative impacts such as social comparison, peer pressure, conformity to harmful behaviors, and the normalization of harmful behaviors can cause significant damage to consumption behaviors which eventually lead to damage to mental and physical health. This paper discusses the multifaceted impacts that various types of social networks have on individuals' consumption decisions and behaviors.

Keywords: Social network; consumption behaviors; consumption decisions; positive impacts; negative impacts.

1. Introduction

A social network is defined as a structure of interconnected and interdependent individuals. Social networks can be both online and offline, they can be connections between family members and friends, or connections in school or work. An individual's social networks can be classified into six main types, the first one is the individual's family and friends, the second one is the individual's temporary networks in public spaces, such as the people one meets in a restaurant or shop. The third one is the people that live within the same geographical region with that individual. The fourth one is the individual's peers, such as one's colleagues or classmates. The fifth one is the individual's partner or spouse's social networks, and the last one is the cultural group or groups that the individual belongs to.

Consumption decisions and behaviors are choices and actions that are related to what an individual consumes. Including things like the goods or services that they consume, the amount of goods and services consume, and the various ways they consume those goods and services.

Humans are social beings, and social networks are like platforms that provide opportunities for individuals to share, discuss, and influence each other's consumption behaviors. As an individual's consumption decisions and behaviors are highly influenced by those social interactions, these interactions can have significant impacts. Some of these impacts are positive such as sharing experiences and information, recommendations, and feedback with each other. But it also can lead to things such as peer pressure, conformity to harmful consumption behaviors, and competitive comparison which leads to the development of harmful consumption behaviors that potentially damage our emotional and physical health.

A review was conducted in order to analyze and discuss works related to the multifaceted impacts that social networks have on individuals' consumption decisions and behaviors. This review process was divided into two parts. The first part is searching and identifying works related to social networks' impacts on consumption decisions and behaviors. The second part is analyzing these works and classifying them according to the types of consumption behaviors, and the types of impacts that social networks have.

The following sections will explore the positive and negative impacts that various types of social networks have on specific examples of consumption decisions and behaviors. Such as how individuals' social networks influence obesity, and how individuals' families and friends influence their food preferences and fat consumption. Furthermore, the complex relationship between peer relationships and alcohol consumption is examined, providing an understanding of how the quality of peer relationships can either increase or decrease alcohol consumption.

2. Analysis of the Influence of Social Networks on Consumption Decisions and Behaviors

2.1. Positive Impacts

Social networks allow individuals to share and exchange their information or knowledge about consumption. Individuals within a social network can share and exchange their knowledge and experiences about certain goods and services, making individuals informed about those goods and services before they make consumption decisions, which can lead to an increase in the number of reasonable consumption decisions and a decrease in consumption decisions in which the goods and services don't align with the consumer's needs and preferences. Individuals can also influence each other's consumption behaviors by making recommendations according to personal preferences and experiences.

When individuals become part of different social networks, they are exposed to various beliefs and opinions that come from individuals with diverse perspectives and experiences. This exposure to various points of view can broaden every individual's perspective and can encourage individuals to explore a variety of new goods or services.

Involving a social network that shares the same interests can lead to an increase in positive impacts on consumption behaviors, such as an increase in reasonable consumption decisions and an increase in sustainable consumption. Involving in such social networks also helps enable group consumption, which can lead to discounts and cost savings during consumption.

The concept of "collaborative consumption", or "sharing economy" has become increasingly popular in recent years. Collaborative consumption is not about owning goods and services solely, but rather about engaging in sharing and utilizing resources, such as ridesharing and accommodation-sharing through various platforms. Or involved in goods and services exchanges within communities or social networks, which helps foster a sense of trust and a sense of community between individuals. Facilitating collaborative consumption helps reduce the waste of resources, it helps stimulate resource efficiency and sustainability and it also helps to create a more reliant and interconnected social network [1].

Individuals in social networks can offer support and advice to each other during consumption processes. Especially when individuals are experiencing a tough time either emotionally or physically. Family and friends can provide advice, guidance, or reassurance when making important consumption decisions which can help increase confidence and reduce stress and anxiety during consumption.

2.2. Negative Impacts

In both real-life networks and online networks, social networks play a significant role in individuals' consumption behaviors. Although those social networks can have positive impacts on consumption behaviors, such as allowing individuals to share and exchange their information or knowledge about consumption, offering support to individuals when they are going through a tough time emotionally or physically, and facilitating collaborative consumption in which individuals can share resources with each other. They can also impose many negative impacts that result in the development of harmful consumption behaviors.

Social comparison can be a positive behavior that helps motivate individuals to strive for self-improvement, but it can also stimulate unhealthy competition between individuals that leads to a decrease insoles self-esteem and engagement in harmful consumption behaviors.

Peer pressure is one of the most serious negative impacts that social networks have on individuals' consumption behaviors, as peers can exert pressure on people which makes them engage in consumption behaviors that they might not engage in if they are alone. The underlying motivation behind peer pressure is individuals' fear of social isolation or the fear of being judged by peers.

Conformity to social norms is an intrinsic part of human nature, as individuals tend to seek acceptance, recognition, and the feeling of belongingness from their peer groups. The normalization of harmful consumption behaviors is also a concerning aspect of conformity to social norms that can have severe negative impacts on consumption behaviors. For instance, an individual who dislikes alcohol joins a peer group that constantly engages in excessive alcohol consumption. In order to gain acceptance from the peer group and socialize with the group, the individual began to engage in alcohol consumption, which may result in addiction and various health issues. Normalizing harmful consumption behaviors can go beyond alcohol consumption to smoking, gambling, and excessive spending. When those harmful consumption behaviors are portrayed as acceptable or even desirable, individuals will become more vulnerable to engaging in them, ignoring the potential harmful impacts that those behaviors can bring.

2.3. Obesity

Throughout the years, much social science literature has suggested that social networks have significant impacts on individuals' maintenance of health and protection from a variety of diseases.

Obesity is a consequence of voluntary decisions and behaviors. Individuals are highly embedded in social networks and their decisions and behaviors are influenced by the decisions, behaviors, and appearance of the individuals in their social networks. There is a large possibility that the weight gained by an individual might impact the weight gain of the other individuals.

Three interconnected processes play a crucial role in how social networks influence individuals' weight and behaviors related to weight. The first process is social contagion, which suggests that the social networks in which individuals are embedded have a significant impact on their weight and their weight-related behaviors [2]. The second process is social capital, which refers to the sense of belongingness and the social support that individuals receive from their social networks [2]. As individuals' sense of belongingness increase and the social support that they get an increase, it increases their self-esteem and would also stimulate their self-efficacy. The third process is social selection, which suggests that individuals' social networks might develop based on their weight, as individuals might form social connections and relationships with other individuals who have similar weight and weight-related behaviors with them [2].

2.4. Research

One way in which social networks can influence an individual's weight is through imaging the behaviors of other individuals within that social network [2]. For example, cultural practices and food preferences embedded within a family or community can shape an individual's food consumption behaviors. A study about African American Women's perceptions of body size and weight indicates that food preferences and eating habits are strongly related to familial networks, as those individuals tend to conform to the majority's food preferences and eating habits to reduce family tension and social pressure [3]. In an experimental study, female undergraduate students in the USA were observed and the results indicate that their snack choices and their choice of snack size were often similar to the choices of other individuals in the same social environment [4].

3. Fat and Food Consumption

3.1. Research

A food frequency survey was completed by 361 people consisting of 15-year-old adolescents, their mothers and fathers, and the friends of their mothers and fathers. The study aims to investigate how food and fat consumption are related to families and friends [5].

3.2. Results

The results showed that there is a clear similarity in food and fat consumption between parents and between parents and their children. Within a family, the consumption of food is 76-94% related, indicating that members from the same family tend to consume similar types of food and similar amounts of fat [5]. Also, the study analyzed the fat consumption pattern of the daily members and found that there is moderate Pearson correlations for fat consumption between parents (Ranging from 0.30-0.34), mothers and child (Ranging from 0.19-0.38), and fathers and child (Ranging from 0.16-0.26). The correlations indicate that fat consumption patterns were similar within each family [5].

The study found that the influence of family on an individual's food and fat consumption behaviors is strong, which suggests that an individual's food and fat consumption behaviors may be shaped by familial factors such as the culture of the family, the food the family prefers and the food available in that family [5].

4. Alcohol Consumption

4.1. Peer Relationship

The social learning theory was used to demonstrate how peer relationships affect college students' alcohol consumption and the researchers suggested that the quality of peer relationships, which is defined by stability, intimacy, and support, influences alcohol consumption in three ways [6].

The first way is the absence of the quality of peer relationships, which would lead to an increase in alcohol consumption [7]. The absence of the quality of peer relationships may result in students feeling stressed or isolated, causing them to have negative emotions. Research regarding alcohol consumption suggests that alcohol helps reduce the levels of isolation, pain, support, and the levels of intimacy or conflicts with others [7]. When students begin to use alcohol as a strategy to cope with their feelings of stress or isolation, their alcohol consumption increases which leads to a problematic cycle and eventually increases their negative emotions.

The second way is that alcohol is used in peer interactions, which would increase the amount of alcohol consumption [7]. A study that studies college students during college and 4 and 7 years after college suggests that social environment plays an important role in predicting alcohol consumption [7]. When students are in a peer group in which alcohol consumption is prevalent, they tend to drink more in order to share drinking experiences with their peers [8]. Or, they would try to search for peer groups that allow drinking in order to enhance their social contact with others, making an alcohol prevalent environment important for forming quality peer relationships.

The third way is if peers do not drink or they dislike alcohol, which would decrease the amount of alcohol consumption [7]. This influence on alcohol consumption is shaped by social reinforcement, modeling, and cognitive processes [7]. The social reinforcement is that a peer group's disapproval of alcohol consumption would create an environment that supports abstinent alcohol consumption and encourages students to follow those consumption behaviors. Modeling is when there are students in the peer group who don't drink or drink lightly, they become the role models of the students in the peer group, which reinforces the consumption behaviors of consuming little alcohol or no alcohol. The cognitive process is that as little or no alcohol consumption is normal or expected in the peer group, it is almost necessary for students to drink less or to no drink in order to socialize and become accepted or popular in the peer group.

4.2. Family and Peer Relationship

Research was conducted to investigate how family and peers influence the alcohol and drug consumption of female and male adolescents [9]. Data were collected from a random sample of 27,000 questionnaires and the results indicate that familial connections have a relatively strong influence on adolescents' alcohol consumption, and this influence is operated mainly through peers. Adolescents who share relatively strong connections with their families are less likely to have close peers who engage in alcohol and drug consumption [9]. While adolescents who have family members who engage in alcohol and drug consumption are more likely to have close peers who engage in alcohol and drug consumption [9].

4.3. Social Media

An example of an online social network is social media, which is becoming increasingly popular as a way to gain information from others and interact with others. Social media is important for consumption behaviors as it has the ability to provide information about products and services, instant recommendations and feedback from others, and personalized content and advertisements that are based on an individual's behaviors and preferences.

A survey was conducted in April 2014 which aims to investigate how marketing and peer groups may encourage college students 'alcohol consumption through social media. The participants of the study were college students aged 18-22 years old [10].

The result of the study suggests that alcohol consumption behaviors were directly related to how those students perceived alcohol consumption and their attitudes towards alcohol consumption, which are developed from their interactions with their peers both online and offline, as well as the alcohol-related content on their social media [10].

5. Conclusion

Both online and offline social networks provide opportunities for individuals to share and exchange information, seek social acceptance and recognition, and engage in consumption behaviors that are either positive or negative. The interactions of individuals within a social network significantly influence individuals' consumption behaviors. This influence that social networks exert is multifaceted, as it showcases both positive and negative impacts.

In a world in which social networks are an indispensable part of every individual's life, it is crucial for individuals to understand the ways that social networks influence consumption behaviors and the multifaceted impacts that they trigger. Awareness of these dynamics empowers individuals to make more informed consumption decisions and engage in more reasonable consumption behaviors. This increase in healthier consumption decisions and behaviors will promote welfare and prosperity among social networks.

Future research and studies about the relationship between social networks and consumption behaviors can delve deeper into the mechanisms by which social networks influence consumption behaviors, such as the psychological reasons that motivate individuals to conform to social norms and the reasons that individuals are influenced by peer pressure. Furthermore, research and studies can investigate the ways interventions, and the effectiveness of interventions, which will provide a valuable understanding of how we can utilize social networks for healthier consumption behaviors.

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