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Citation: Huh, Y. E., Scopelliti, I. ORCID: 0000-0001-6712-5332 and Myaeng, S. Y. (2020). Presence of Meaning in Life Improves Response to Others' Self-Promotion. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 48, pp. 480-481.

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Presence of Meaning in Life Improves Response to Others' Self-Promotion

Advances in Consumer Research, vol. 48

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ABSTRACT

Self-promotion is prevalent and aversive. We observe that people who think their life is meaningful tend to experience less negative emotional responses to others' self-promotional attempts. A simple intervention involving a reflection on the presence of meaning in one's life significantly improves recipients' responses to others' self-promotion.

Presence of Meaning in Life Improves Response to Others' Self-Promotion

It is not uncommon to be exposed to others' self-promotional attempts, especially in the digital age. People use social media platforms to convey a positive self-image by sharing positive moments, consumption experiences, and the best aspects of their lives (Kross et al., 2013). They may believe their audiences would receive their achievements and fortunes favorably, yet recipients often perceive self-promotion as bragging and respond negatively to it (Packard, Gershoff, & Wooten, 2016; Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015; Sezer, Gino, & Norton, 2018). Frequent exposure to this type of messages may in part explain why the consumption of social media has been linked to declines in subjective well-being (Kross et al., 2013; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2015).

Previous research has shown that the lack of a sense of meaning underlies some negative emotional consequences of social media use (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014), and that the effect of social feedback on post authors' self-esteem is moderated by individual differences in one's sense of purpose in life (Burrow & Rainone, 2016). Yet, little is known about whether individual differences can mitigate the perceived aversiveness of others' self-promotion. The present research addresses this gap by proposing that the *search for* vs. *presence of meaning in life* (MIL; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008; King & Napa, 1998) influences recipients' well-being by changing their emotional responses to others' self-promotion.

MIL, defined as “the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life (Steger, 2009, p. 682),” has a multitude of beneficial and salubrious effects, including higher life satisfaction, better social relationships, and more skillful adjustment to stressful life events (Park & Baumeister, 2017; Steger et al., 2008). Presence of MIL is associated with psychological stability, healthy self-acceptance, strong social relationships, higher satisfaction with oneself and others, and better ability to recover emotionally from exposure to negative stimuli (Steger et al., 2008; Schaefer et al., 2013). Thus, we predict presence of MIL to be related to less negative emotional responses to others' self-promotion—perhaps the act being viewed as a form of celebration rather than bragging. We tested this prediction in two pre-registered studies, the second of which shows that a simple intervention to increase one's sense of presence of MIL can improve responses to others' self-promotion.

In study 1 (N = 202), we the relationship between MIL and emotional responses to others' acts of self-promotion. Participants imagined following many of their former high school classmates on Instagram, and seeing that a former classmate posted a photo of a luxurious spa with a caption about having a wonderful holiday. They indicated the extent to which the post made them experience positive emotions and negative emotions (1 = not at all; 7 = very much), and completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al. 2006).

As predicted, the presence of MIL was positively correlated with the experience of positive emotions ($r = .196, p = .005$) and negatively correlated with the experience of negative emotions ($r = -.157, p = .026$).

Study 2 tested whether an intervention to foster one's perceptions of presence MIL would reduce negative responses to self-promotion. At Time 1, participants (N = 1,808) completed the MLQ questionnaire. One week later (Time 2), all participants were invited to take part in a second survey, which was open to 400 participants (401 actually completed it). These

participants were randomly assigned to an intervention or control condition. Participants in the intervention condition were asked to reflect upon and write a few sentences about the meaning in their lives. They were instructed to focus on anything that gives meaning to their lives and makes their lives significant. Participants in the control condition did not complete this writing task. Afterwards, all participants imagined accessing their Facebook account and seeing a post by a former classmates mentioning a promotion to a higher rank position. Participants indicated the extent to which the post caused them to experience positive and negative emotions, annoyance, envy, and irritation (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). Finally, participants completed the MLQ a second time and reported their demographic information.

The intervention increased presence of MIL at Time 2, $F(1, 255) = 30.21, p < .001$. Participants in the control group showed no change in their MIL scores between Time 1 and Time 2. Replicating the results of Study 1, the presence of MIL was positively correlated with the experience of positive feelings ($r = .280, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with the experience of negative feelings ($r = -.269, p < .001$) and other specific negative emotions ($r_s < -.186, p_s < .001$) when reading the post.

Most importantly, participants in the intervention condition experienced less negative emotions, $F(1, 396) = 6.93, p = .009$, and felt less annoyed, envious, and irritated, than participants in the control condition. As a more rigorous test of whether the intervention changed emotional responses to self-promotion by increasing presence of MIL, we observed a significant mediation of presence of MIL on all emotions measured. These results demonstrate that an intervention as simple as writing a few sentences about what makes one's life meaningful significantly increased participants' sense of presence of MIL and improved their experience when exposed to a self-promotional social media post.

Social media has become an integral part of people's lives. Although a beneficial means of instant communication and connection, these platforms are also commonly used for self-promotional purposes, which may be received adversely (Pew Research Center, 2018), decreasing one's sense of well-being (Kross et al., 2013; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Verduyn, et al., 2015). The present research is one of the first to suggest simple ways to reduce negative interpretations of acts of self-promotion. Our findings suggest that briefly contemplating the significance and meaning of one's life can help mitigate negative responses to others' acts of self-promotion.

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